



**THE PRODUCTION, CIRCULATION, AND
RECEPTION OF SEXUAL KNOWLEDGES IN
PUBLISHED ADVICE LITERATURE IN BRITAIN AND
IREALND, 1918-1987**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the markets, networks, mediating institutions and individuals behind the production, circulation, and reception of popular sexual knowledges in published advice literature in Britain, the Irish Free State, and the Republic of Ireland between 1918 and 1987. It uses archives of publishers, authors, libraries, and bookshops to trace these processes. I argue that taking these processes and those involved in them at all stages seriously opens up possibilities for understanding the polyvocal, uneven, and complicated story of the development of sexual culture. I show that advice literature occupied a ‘grey zone’ in sexual culture physically located in public spaces such as retail and library locations, raising questions about who had access to which knowledges, where, and what this could mean both culturally and for understandings of the self.

My methodology brings book and publishing histories into conversation with cultural histories of sex and sexuality. In doing so, it demonstrates the hitherto unrecognised significance of publishers, their relationships with ‘sex experts’, and the markets and institutions within, through, and between which advice books and related ephemera circulated for the production and movement of ideas about sex, bodies, and desires. Piecing together a patchwork of correspondence in publishing, institutional, and individual archives, this thesis ultimately complicates teleological narratives of ‘sexual revolution’ in the twentieth century by arguing that the process of knowledge production was layered and iterative. Through this, I place significance on the interwar period as a pivotal moment in the development of sexual culture, pushing back against narratives of encompassing, transformative change in the latter half of the century.

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mile maith agat.*

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A NOTE ON SOURCES

All correspondence from private individuals in this thesis has been anonymised, except for individuals writing in a professional or organisational capacity. Some archives require this of closed correspondence (the Wellcome Collection, the Dublin Diocesan Archives). I have chosen to follow this practice with all correspondence even where not required. I have also left references to genealogical records via Ancestry.com minimal. This is to maintain the privacy of those who were corresponding with doctors, authors, ‘sex experts’, and state authorities on often sensitive, personal matters.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A&U – George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

ASAI – Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

BES – British Eugenics Society

BSBC – British Social Biology Council

BSSSP – British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology

BUF – British Union of Fascists

CDC – Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress

CMAC – Catholic Marriage Advisory Council

CTSI – Catholic Truth Society of Ireland

FPA – Family Planning Association

IFS – Irish Free State

IPPF – International Planned Parenthood Federation

IRA – Irish Republican Army

IUD – Intrauterine device

MGC – Marriage Guidance Council

MO – Mass-Observation

NBL – National Book League

NLB – National Library for the Blind

NYSSV – New York Society for the Suppression of Vice

ROI – Republic of Ireland

SSEG – Society for Sex Education and Guidance

INTRODUCTION

On 21st April 1969, BBC Two broadcast an episode of the documentary series *Yesterday's Witness* entitled 'Birth Control in the Twenties'. Eight women interviewees—Dr Helena Wright, Dr Evelyn Fisher, Dr Olive Gimson, Baroness Mary Stocks, Charis Frankenburg, Alicia Fleming, Cecily Mure, and Elizabeth Richardson—told their stories of the evolution of the birth control movement in the nearly fifty years prior to the broadcast. The episode opened with Richardson's claim that sex had been silenced—'Two dirty words were Birth Control'—until Marie Stopes's transformative advice book *Married Love* (1918) opened up public conversations around marital sex and contraception. It closed with Wright's assessment that by 1969, everything had changed:

We are now receiving people of all ages, women of all ages, and many unmarried girls, serious girls, who come to us for advice, discussion and help in their first sexual experiences, which they are dealing with in the most sensible, level-headed kind of way. And when a girl comes up, [...] who has had a certain amount of experience and who is happy and satisfied and she's in no fear of an unwanted pregnancy. I put to her the same question as I used to all those years ago to the women of Telford Road. I say: "What do you get out of making love to your young man?" And the contrast is extraordinary. The girl's face shines brilliantly and she says, "Oh doctor, it's glorious."¹

¹ Wellcome, Philip Rainsford Evans and Barbara Evans Papers (henceforth: PP/PRE), PP/PRE/J.1/11, 'Yesterday's Witness' transcript; Peet, Stephen, producer, 'Yesterday's Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties', *BBC Two* (21 April 1969).

Yesterday's Witness engaged in the making of ideas about sexual revolution at a time when that framing device was just coming into being. Beginning with a spark that broke through sexual ignorance and prudery, catalysed by interconnected networks of stalwart women provisioning birth control clinics and offering sexual advice, it suggested that a comprehensive overhaul in attitudes towards and experiences of sex had taken place by the year of the programme's broadcast. In doing so, it positioned birth control clinics and the women who facilitated them as a frontier of sexual change. *Yesterday's Witness* as a series intended to showcase to the watching public the stories of those who 'played a personal part in changing [Briton's] lives' through events 'largely forgotten'.² The sensational story of public ignorance surrounding the transformative individuals and events of the twentieth century was thus at the heart of this broadcast. Through narrating the history of the birth control movement in this way, the BBC positioned 'sex experts' and birth control activists as drivers of broader sexual change who fundamentally transformed the sexual and relational lives of Britons.

At the beginning of this perceived shift was Stopes's *Married Love*, a book that, as Laura Doan has noted, was the author's first venture into 'modern sex research' and a major contribution to marital advice.³ The claim that *Married Love* was the advice book that began the process of making sex modern, removing the veil of sexual ignorance, and enabling the proliferation of sexual discourse loaded the role of published advice literature with significant weight in the process of cultural change. This has foregrounded Stopes as a major actor in the reimagining of

² BBC Written Archives Centre (henceforth: BBC WAC), T/PRT/T56/2/1, Documentary Department, *Yesterday's Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties*, General File, Documentary Programmes Department: Transmission Promotion, *Radio Times* Article (24 March 1969).

³ Laura Doan, 'Marie Stopes's Wonderful Rhythm Charts: Normalizing the Natural', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 78:4 (2017), p.597. Throughout this thesis, I use the eighteenth edition of *Married Love*, published in 1926: Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties*, eighteenth edition (London, 1926).

sexual life, a position in which a considerable amount of the scholarship on the role of advice literature, and on Stopes herself, has also cast her.⁴ The ‘sexual revolution’ of the twentieth century and the rise of the birth control movement has even been framed *as Stopes’s* on occasion.⁵

The impression of a small cast of characters pushing a revolutionary change in sexual mores was certainly left on viewers at the time too. William Marshall’s review of the episode in the *Daily Mirror*, in slightly misogynistic terms, praised the ‘wrinkle-faced ladies, survivors of those pioneering days’ who pushed back against the ‘puritanism and crippling bigotry [sic] of the Victorian Era’.⁶ Other reviewers commented on the quick and ‘extra-ordinary turnabout in public opinion’ on birth control and discussions of sex that the episode conveyed.⁷ The Victorian was associated by those producing and reviewing the programme with repression and conservatism. It acted as a foil to the moment of sexual liberation in which they found themselves, and a stark contrast to later cultural understandings that characterised Victorianism

⁴ Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2003), pp.37-38; Alexander Geppert, ‘Divine Sex, Happy Marriage, Regenerated Nation: Marie Stopes’s Marital Manual ‘Married Love’ and the Making of a Best-Seller, 1918-1955’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8:3 (1998), pp.389-433; Ruth Hall, *Passionate Crusader: The Life of Marie Stopes* (London, 1977); Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford, 2013), pp.47-48; Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven, 1995); Peter Neushul, ‘Marie C. Stopes and the Popularization of Birth Control Technology’, *Technology and Culture*, 39:2 (1998), pp.245-272; Lisa Z. Sigel, *Making Modern Love: Sexual Narratives and Identities in Interwar Britain* (Philadelphia, 2012).

⁵ Clare Debenham, *Marie Stopes’ Sexual Revolution and the Birth Control Movement* (New York, 2018).

⁶ William Marshall, ‘The Long, Bitter Battle for Birth Control’, *Daily Mirror*, 22 April 1969, issue 20316, p.18.

⁷ BBC WAC, T/PRT/T56, Documentary Department, Press Cuttings, Stanley Reynolds, ‘Birth control’, *The Guardian* (22 April 1969); Martin Jackson, ‘Angelic...but was she right?’, *Daily Express* (22 April 1969).

in terms of morality, social stability, hard work, and philanthropy.⁸ As Jeffrey Weeks has notably argued, using the Victorian as a ‘synonym for a harsh and repressive sexual puritanism’ was a deeply engrained cultural reference in the twentieth century, yet ‘paradoxically it was during the nineteenth century the debate about sexuality exploded.’⁹

Yesterday's Witness was a well-received series, applauded for its ‘splendid formula’ and the producer’s ability to give ‘a lot of information without cheapening or diluting the factual content’.¹⁰ The episode in question was generally liked by the audience, with half of respondents to a post-viewing questionnaire rating the programme ‘A’, which encapsulated feelings of enjoyment and interest.¹¹ It received sixty-seven on the BBC’s Reaction Index, a rating system that collated responses from viewing panels to produce scores from zero (indicating the programme was not enjoyed) to one-hundred, the maximum enjoyment possible.¹² It did receive a lower rating than episodes the week before and two weeks after, and the Audience Research Report noted that some viewers were ‘less than enthusiastic’, however, ‘almost all found some interest in it’, and there was ‘virtually no specific averse criticism’.¹³ Yet the details of the programme reveal a moment in which sex and its public discussion were

⁸ Collins, *Modern Love*, p.5; Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford, 1994), pp.1-35; Stephen Evans, ‘Thatcher and the Victorians: A Suitable Case for Comparison’, *History*, 82:268 (1997), pp.545-750.

⁹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The regulation of sexuality since 1800*, second edition (London, 1989), p.19.

¹⁰ BBC WAC, T/PRT/1/T56/2/1, Documentary Department, *Yesterday's Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties*, General File, letter from Stephen Peet (12 May 1969).

¹¹ BBC WAC, T/PRT/1/T56/2/1, Documentary Department, *Yesterday's Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties*, General File, Audience Research Report (15 May 1969); Robert Silvey, ‘Methods of Viewer Research Employed by the British Broadcasting Corporation’, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15:1 (Spring 1951), p.102.

¹² Silvey, ‘Methods of Viewer Research Employed by the British Broadcasting Corporation’, pp.103-104.

¹³ BBC WAC, T/PRT/1/T56/2/1, Documentary Department, *Yesterday's Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties*, General File, Audience Research Report (15 May 1969).

still very much contested, despite the narrative of transformation and mostly positive reception. The episode was broadcast post-watershed, at a time when it was less likely for younger viewers to be watching, limiting those who encountered it. Research estimated that the audience fell at just 4.8 per cent of the population of the United Kingdom, comparatively low when set against the 15.6 per cent audience for a programme broadcast on BBC One at the same time.¹⁴

Episode reviews spoke to the incomplete nature of the transformation of social attitudes towards sex and birth control. In *The Guardian*, Stanley Reynolds commented that pockets of ‘outrage’ against birth control maintained, particularly amongst Catholic hierarchies, with ‘sleepless nights [...] spent in the Vatican thinking about the pill.’¹⁵ Revealing somewhat ironically his own prejudices too, Reynolds wrote that the programme was missing a ‘contrary word’ recognising the ‘danger of destroying the mother figure’ and that society was ‘in danger of going too far in accepting birth control [...] playing into the hands of the dehumanising masters of our technological society.’¹⁶ In his self-consciously Orwellian argument, we see how even those praised the pioneering work of the interviewees were keen to express their fears around the impact of their legacies on society. The reflections of the interviewees themselves were informed by similar concerns. Wright’s emphasis on the ‘sensible’ approach of her patients to sex unsubtly gestured towards the ways in which sexual behaviours had to be rendered respectable to be speakable. Even if sex was no longer silenced, it was increasingly controlled

¹⁴ BBC WAC, T/PRT/1/T56/2/1, Documentary Department, *Yesterday’s Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties*, General File, Audience Research Report (15 May 1969). On the structure and uses of BBC Audience Research Reports, see Billy Smart, ‘The BBC Television Audience Research Reports, 1957-1979’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 34:3 (2014), pp.452-462.

¹⁵ BBC WAC, T/PRT/T56, Documentary Department, Press Cuttings, Stanley Reynolds, ‘Birth control’, *The Guardian* (22 April 1969).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and regulated, as Michel Foucault famously argued.¹⁷ Weeks's explicitly Foucauldian systematic historical analysis of sexual change in this period is again useful here, as he neatly demonstrated that the limits (or weaknesses) of the liberalisation of sexuality 'flowed from its strengths'—reforms involved compromise, new tensions emerged, and the 'respectable' took on increasingly moralistic tones.¹⁸

Moreover, the reliance on Stopes's *Married Love* as a narrative device flattened the landscape of sexual, marital, and contraceptive advice across this period. Whilst the programme showcased the voices of a number of women who contributed to the evolution of advice culture and birth control service provisioning, the significance and contours of the market for publications beyond *Married Love* in this context was lost. Necessarily, the story presented was constrained by time limits. With only thirty minutes allocated for the episode, producer Stephen Peet deliberately chose a narrow focus on birth control clinics and a select few activists.¹⁹ This approach did elicit some outrage from others in the world of family planning, for instance, birth control campaigner Dora Russell criticised the programme and the BBC generally for not adequately researching and misunderstanding the complexity of the movement.²⁰ As Doan's work has shown, top-down narratives of sexual change that locate women as 'popularisers' of sexological research have failed to recognise the messy, iterative 'ventilation' process that

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will To Knowledge* (London, 1998), pp.17-21.

¹⁸ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp.273-288.

¹⁹ BBC WAC, T/PRT/T56/5/1, Documentary Department, Yesterday's Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties, 'Birth Control in the Twenties', letter from Stephen Peet to Dora Russell (23 April 1969).

²⁰ BBC WAC, T/PRT/T56/5/1, Documentary Department, Yesterday's Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties, 'Birth Control in the Twenties', letter from Dora Russell to Stephen Peet (29 April 1969).

knowledges went through.²¹ Television made and remade history, and *Yesterday's Witness* thus used the archive of memories and events in the birth control movement as 'generalization or gesture' to construct the idea of Britain's sexual revolution at a time when it was establishing as a narrative device, both producing and becoming part of a history with neat borders and a clear trajectory of change.²² To a viewer unfamiliar with this world, the mythology presented was sudden, all-encompassing, and transformative, set off by a single published advice book and driven by a select few important women.

This thesis is about the complexities and contours of the production, circulation, and reception of published advice literature from the interwar years until the 1980s within, through, and between different national contexts, challenging and nuancing the mythology of sexual change across this period. It explores the mediating individuals and institutions that shaped the content and marketing of, and access to, such books. In doing so, it pushes back against oversimplified narratives of sexual change and the 'popularisation' of knowledge to examine the polyvocal networks behind the creation and dispersal sexual discourse in Britain, the Irish Free State (IFS), and the Republic of Ireland (ROI). Through this, I demonstrate how narratives of sexual change have been framed around the lives and work of pioneering figures. Whilst many of involved in the production and circulation of advice literature were women—and such narratives have been defined around the likes of Stopes and Wright—male publishers, authors, and others often sought to control this same story in order to lay claim to their own pioneering roles in the evolution of sexual culture across the century.

²¹ Laura Doan, 'Troubling Popularisation: On the Gendered Circuits of a 'Scientific' Knowledge of Sex', *Gender & History*, 31:2 (2019), pp.304-318.

²² John Ellis, 'Television and History', *History Workshop Journal*, 56 (2003), pp.278-279.

These arguments hinge on an investigation of the publishing process—bringing book and publishing histories into conversation with social and cultural approaches—to map the intellectual networks, communities, and markets created around advice culture in the interwar period as they shifted and endured across decades and geographies. Through this, it seeks to understand advice books not only as culturally significant for developing sexual discourses, but as commercial objects made and remade by extensive networks of people within and connected to the publishing industry. These people had varied complex personal, political, and business motivations, however, many publishers and publishing houses sought to distance themselves from the taint of the marketplace in this period.

This thesis is also about those individuals who encountered—and were imagined to potentially encounter—advice literature and broader advice culture in different public and private contexts, and how and why they engaged with it. Publishers and authors together imagined the audience for their advice books, just as librarians, booksellers, and censors attempted to determine where that audience might find them. This fundamentally shaped the content of these texts and where they were found. External factors, including state censorship—in the case of this thesis, in England, Ireland and the United States—also moulded the shape and dispersal of these publications. These comparative contexts illustrate foremost the power of transnational consumerism in the circulation of sexual knowledges, but also how different forms of law and state institutions shaped the markets and the knowledges circulating within, through, and between them, also creating a starting point for thinking about how faith and religion shaped institutions and states, and ultimately ideas about sex, bodies, and desires.

In view of this, problematising definitions of access to expand historical understandings of the subtle and varied ways in which encounters with sexual knowledges happened within and between different national contexts, I draw on advances in material, spatial, sensory, and disability histories to conceptualise this process. For example, exploring contexts including interwar department stores, chain retailers like W.H. Smith & Son and Woolworth's, and public libraries, I argue that people's access to sexual knowledges was often fleeting, ephemeral, and embedded in the everyday. In doing so, I demonstrate that sexual advice sat in a 'grey area' or middle ground of sexual culture, where everyday encounters held multiple competing meanings contingent on where they took place and who they involved.

Moving beyond these moments, this thesis thus extrapolates the relationship between advice culture and changing conceptualisations of the self, examining the ways in which letter writing to 'sex experts' and other perceived authority figures on sex acted as a psychological exercise to negotiate and retell internalised experiences of sexual life. This practice made writing about sex both expressive and constitutive. Through this, I show how advice culture became part of longer-term personal biographies and wider narratives of sexual change that illustrate the 'afterlives' of the interwar moment where sex began to take on new meanings in both public and private realms. This ultimately complicates overly simplistic narratives of a 'sexual revolution' that reduce the scope and impact of advice literature to mythologised moments and individuals as in *Yesterday's Witness*. The development of sexual culture was an uneven process which maps onto a long history of the advice genre, the unpicking of which reveals the networks and markets created and sustained within the publishing world as more fundamental than has previously been recognised. This suggests a new narrative of sexual change in which the intricate markets, networks, and mediating institutions and individuals played a substantial role

in how, where, and by and for whom sexual knowledges were produced, circulated, and encountered.

Publishing Advice for a Mass Market

Sex instruction manuals had been published for popular audiences in English as early as the seventeenth century with, as Roy Porter and Lesley Hall have argued, a handful of texts between then and the twentieth century being ‘quite inordinately influential’.²³ In the nineteenth century, the volume of published advice proliferated.²⁴ Towards the twentieth century, the foundations of advice culture were set in domestic manuals aimed largely at the middle-class women, whilst intimate lives were imagined and reimagined by reformers who attempted to change how love was understood in order to reshape marriage.²⁵ The internal and relational self was increasingly seen as a project, evolving through the language of self-improvement, citizenship, and morality reverberating from the previous century.²⁶ By the 1950s, sexual, marital, and relational advice based on popular psychology was increasingly available through mass published media such as newspapers, magazines, and books, with the ‘sex expert’ becoming a more formal authority on sex.²⁷

²³ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp.3, 5.

²⁴ Ibid, p.12.

²⁵ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (Oxford, 1995), pp.71-117; Langhamer, *The English in Love*, pp.7-8.

²⁶ Anne B. Rodrick, *Self-Help and Civic Culture: Citizenship in Victorian Birmingham* (London, 2019), pp.1-48.

²⁷ Langhamer, *The English in Love*, pp.14-15.

In the interwar period where this thesis begins, popular non-fiction books were commodities produced for a newly literate, emergent mass market.²⁸ The space occupied by marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice within the market has typically been understood with reference to the authors of these books as arbiters of an evolving genre of sexual self-help. For instance, in exploring *Married Love* as one of the first contemporary ‘best-sellers’, Alexander Geppert has framed its success in terms of Stopes’s own personal qualities and commercial decisions. Whilst recognising *Married Love* and other books ‘as commodities with a life history of their own, and thus a part of public print culture’, Geppert’s analysis partakes in the trend of emphasising the role of individual sex experts in book production at the expense of the cast of characters operating behind the scenes.²⁹ As Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange have argued, instruction manuals have often been conceptualised as evidence of the communication of ideas about sex, bodies, and desires but ‘rarely has the medium itself been the object of historical enquiry. [...] By focusing on the medium as much as the content of the message, we can begin to connect the history of mass communication with that of sex education.’³⁰

Publishers have appeared fleetingly in some major works on sexual advice being published in twentieth-century Britain. For example, Porter and Hall’s pathbreaking survey mentioned the difficulties with finding publishers for books on sex at the end of the nineteenth century, the initial lack of confidence Stopes’s publishers had in her work early in the century, and the fact that an increasing number of ‘reputable’ companies were producing advice books by 1930 as

²⁸ John Feather, *A History of British Publishing* (London, 2006), pp.148, 150; Geppert, ‘Divine Sex’, p.395.

²⁹ Geppert, ‘Divine Sex’, pp.391-393, 397-398. On best-sellers, see Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, pp.159-160.

³⁰ Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange, ‘Public Pedagogy: Sex Education and Mass Communication in the Mid-Twentieth Century’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 13:1 (2004), p.71.

opposed to the longstanding ‘backstreet’ publishers.³¹ However, they did not demonstrate any sustained interest in how the industry facilitated the circulation of sexual knowledges beyond this. Much of the innovative work drawing together histories of popular sexual knowledge circulation and publishing have instead focused on the nineteenth century, especially on the intersections of sexology and pornography, problematising those early divisions between ‘reputable’ and ‘backstreet’ vendors.³² Beyond sexual knowledge, historians have recognised that publishing firms and those working for and with them chose, designed, and promoted particular texts—whilst this decision-making was moulded by outside factors such as censorship, author interests, and reader interests—having a huge bearing on the types of knowledges that were circulated.³³

But why, then, has the role of publishers been side-lined in relation to advice literature? Social historical scholarship has usually emphasised the lives, voices, and experiences of the readers of advice literature, hence centring correspondence to authors such as Stopes as a key primary source.³⁴ There has also been a tendency to foreground the content of advice books, yet there has been a reticence towards engaging with books as commercial objects, something present even in book histories. As Nicola Wilson has argued, a sustained ‘reluctance to discuss literary

³¹ Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven, 1995), pp.159, 160-161, 220, 261.

³² Sarah Bull, ‘A Purveyor of Garbage? Charles Carrington and the Marketing of Sexual Science in Late-Victorian Britain’, *Victorian Review*, 38:1 (2012), pp.55-76; Sarah Bull, ‘More than a case of mistaken identity: Adult entertainment and the making of early sexology’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 34:1 (2021), pp.10-39; Sarah Bull, ‘Obscenity and the Publication of Sexual Science in Britain, 1810-1914’, Simon Fraser University, PhD thesis, 2014; Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p.220.

³³ Vincent Trott, *Publishers, Readers and the Great War: Literature and Memory since 1918* (London, 2017), p.6.

³⁴ For example, Lesley Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (Cambridge, 1991); Sigel, *Making Modern Love*, pp.46-75.

texts, their physical forms, or their production and revision in terms of sales and distribution' has clouded scholar's abilities to take a holistic view of books attentive to not only content but materiality and the production process as well.³⁵ A thin recognition of the commercial and material nature of publishing has thus contributed to a deficit in historical understandings of the concrete processes in and through which published sexual knowledges came to the mass market in the twentieth century. Moreover, the difficulties with identifying and using publishing records makes it difficult for historians to go behind the scenes to understand how particular books came into being. Most scholars have therefore focused on the end product rather than the process of production itself, leaving room for a reframing of advice literature production and circulation attentive to these themes through interweaving social, cultural, and book history approaches.

Theorising Book and Publishing Histories

This thesis, therefore, seeks to integrate a cultural history approach to advice literature with key concepts from the field of book history.³⁶ It hinges on an investigation of the publishing process behind popular advice books to underpin a more comprehensive understanding of the production, circulation, and reception of sexual knowledges. Leah Price and, earlier, Natalie Zemon Davis's interventions sum this up neatly: books carry relationships as well as ideas, and

³⁵ Nicola Wilson, (ed), *The Book World: Selling and Distributing British Literature, 1900-1940* (Leiden, 2016), p.2.

³⁶ For broad introductions to book and publishing histories, see Leslie Howsam, *Old Books and New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture* (Toronto, 2006); David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, *An Introduction to Book History* (New York, 2013).

‘human interactions transmit books, change books, and imbue books with meaning’.³⁷ Thinking with practical considerations about the production and circulation of books in tandem with concepts of audience and understandings of the cultural and relational importance of advice texts therefore expands our ability to locate their significance in sexual cultural change. Mapping the intellectual networks and communities created around advice culture in the interwar period in particular, and tracing these through the post-war years up to the 1980s, I therefore go beyond simply locating advice books as separately materially or culturally significant. In doing so, I seek to understand their production in terms of the factors internal to and external from the book trade—publishers’ motivations and interests, commercial considerations, geography, censorship, intellectual networks, the gatekeeping of sexual knowledges, and respectability politics—that moulded the types of knowledge they contained.

This draws on debates surrounding the ‘communications circuit’ model of book history proposed by Robert Darnton in 1982 and modified by multiple historians since. Darnton emphasised the importance of relationships and exchanges between actors at different levels within the publishing industry, from authors and publishers to printers, shippers, booksellers, and readers.³⁸ Peter D. McDonald then noted that these exchanges were hierarchical, with varying levels of authority and prestige held by these historical actors.³⁹ Thomas R. Adams and Nicholas Barker altered this approach further, placing more emphasis on the book as a bibliographical document. They foregrounded the material book, focusing on events—

³⁷ Leah Price, *How To Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, 2012), p.206; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, 1975), p.192.

³⁸ Robert Darnton, ‘What Is the History of Books?’, *Daedalus*, 111:3 (1982), pp.67-69.

³⁹ Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880-1914* (Cambridge, 1997), pp.11-12.

publishing, manufacturing, distribution, and reception—in the book’s lifecycle instead of human actors as Darnton did.⁴⁰ Despite their oppositions, David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery note, these evolutions of the ‘communications circuit’ organise ‘our understandings of books in the context of material concerns, taking into account the economic imperatives governing book and textual production’.⁴¹ Combining the human, material, and cultural focuses of these models thus allows for a more rounded, holistic view of advice books through identifies their relationship to the markets, institutions, and individuals that produced, circulated, and engaged with them.

Recognising both the importance of human elements of the book trade, in conjunction with books as material, commercial objects, this thesis therefore follows recent attempts to answer questions about the messy, changeable relationship between the material, commercial, and the cultural in the context of book publishing, something that is still to be substantially drawn out.⁴²

I take inspiration here from Catherine Feely’s recent thesis on the reception of Karl Marx’s writings that has exemplified that placing book history in conversation with cultural approaches to the distribution and reception of particular texts can contribute to a more thorough understanding of books as simultaneously material, commercial, and symbolic.⁴³ I also look to Iain Stevenson’s *Book Makers* (2010), which spotlighted the ‘quirky, creative, unpredictable, exasperating, endearing, infuriating, and gloriously diverse’ people that composed and shaped

⁴⁰ Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker, ‘A New Model for the Study of the Book’ in Nicolas Barker, (ed), *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society: The Clark Lectures, 1986-1987* (London, 1993), pp.13-14.

⁴¹ Finkelstein and McCleery, *Introduction to Book History*, p.86.

⁴² Alexis Weedon, *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836-1916* (London, 2016), p.2; Finkelstein and McCleery, *Introduction to Book History*, p.86.

⁴³ Catherine Feely, ‘Karl Marx, *Capital* and Radical Book Cultures In Britain, 1881-1945’, University of Manchester, PhD thesis, 2011.

the industry and its outputs, to emphasise the human and relational elements of the industry beyond those usually retaining the focus of work on the advice genre.⁴⁴ In doing so, this thesis locates advice books as not only culturally meaningful for the content and knowledges they circulated and the ways in which they became part of individual lives, but as commercial objects made, re-made, and defined by extensive networks of people in and around the publishing industry with varied and complex personal, political, and business motivations. This contributes to a more holistic view of the advice literature trade that frames it as much more iterative, polyvocal, and conversational than has previously been recognised.⁴⁵

Readership and Audiences

This thesis looks beyond the creation of sexual knowledges and advice books to questions of who they were produced for, and who actually engaged with them. Delving into the production process behind advice books in Chapters One and Two, I explore the intended reader as a product of joint publisher and author decision-making. The intended audience for advice books—often stipulated as heterosexual, married, middle- and working-class men and women—has occupied space in scholarship on advice literature for many years, especially in relation to Stopes’s texts.⁴⁶ However, the role of publishers and authors in imagining, catering

⁴⁴ Iain Stevenson, *Book Makers: British Publishing in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2010), p.xv.

⁴⁵ Adams and Barker, ‘A New Model for the Study of the Book’, pp.13-14; McDonald, *British Literary Culture*.

⁴⁶ For example, see Claire Davey, ‘Birth Control in Britain During the Interwar Years: Evidence from the Stopes Correspondence’, *Journal of Family History*, 13:3 (1988), pp.329-345; Evelyn Faulkner, ‘Powerless to prevent him’: Attitudes of married working-class women in the 1920s and the rise of sexual power’, *Local Population Studies*, 49 (1992), pp.51-61; Lara L. Fraser, ‘The Perfect Union: Marie Stopes, the Middle Classes, and the Quest for Happy Monogamy’, Brandeis University, PhD thesis, 2000; Ellen M. Holtzman, ‘The Pursuit of Married Love:

to, and defining the audience beyond this has not received as much attention. We have a patchy sense of how far the actual readership of advice literature mapped onto these imaginings, and more broadly, studies of reading habits generally have challenged stereotypes and assumptions about who read what and why.⁴⁷ The limited nature of investigation in this area is in part due to the comparably sparse nature of evidence of readership in correspondence and ephemera archives of ‘sex experts’ who published in the twentieth century, making it difficult to get a sense of how and by whom advice books were read, and how this aligned with the intended audiences for it.

These challenges evoke Christine Grandy’s discussion of cultural history’s ‘absent audience’. She has argued that cultural historians have often presumed the significance of culture to an audience that they struggle to—or do not try to—locate in specific terms, ironically perhaps in the same way that authors and publishers struggled to identify their audience.⁴⁸ Justifying focusing on particular cultural products based on the representative ‘impact’ that they *could* have had on historical subjects, Grandy has argued, side-steps the issue of knowing who those historical subjects were. As she has asked, if culture matters, how do we know who it mattered to, and in what ways did it matter?⁴⁹ It is often difficult to establish who accessed sexual knowledge through and around advice literature and how they responded to it, thus working with already patchy, disparate archives necessitates a more complex theoretical approach to the shape and nature of audiences.

Women’s Attitudes toward Sexuality and Marriage in Great Britain, 1918-1939’, *Journal of Social History*, 16:2 (1982), pp.39-51; Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp.249-256.

⁴⁷ Flint, *The Woman Reader*, pp.186-249.

⁴⁸ Christine Grandy, ‘Cultural History’s Absent Audience’, *Cultural and Social History*, 16:5 (2019), pp.643-663.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp.644-646, 658-659.

Looking beyond the discipline of history, communication studies scholar Martin Allor's conceptualisation of 'the audience' is therefore helpful for working through the difficulties cultural history approaches present in terms of encounters with and the reception of advice books. He has argued that 'the audience' is a temporal creation that only truly exists in an imagined sense.⁵⁰ Allor's conceptualisation is useful in the context of this thesis because it allows us to recognise the malleable, changeable nature of audiences for advice books, and the ways in which they may not be represented or present in the existing archives, encouraging us to read against the grain. Chelsea-Anne Saxby's recent thesis which worked to 'push past' the unknowable audience showed that the scattered representations of audiences in the archives are useful because they showcase 'exceptional' moments of engagement that highlight the boundaries of both audiencehood and public discussions of sex.⁵¹ Linking back to advice literature, the Stopes correspondence is one such exceptional moment that has come to occupy a central and defining position in how we understand the effects of advice literature, yet there are copious other sources which we can draw on to develop our understanding of audience in the context of sexual advice.

In this thesis, then, my methodology thus involves the exercise of 'imagining' the audience for advice literature through piecing together a puzzle of varied source material that contains snippets of imagined and real readership. Moving beyond attempts to 'reconstruct' audiences and readership, I instead use the term 'imagining' to frame this exercise in order to recognise

⁵⁰ Martin Allor, 'Relocating the Site of the Audience', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5:3 (1988), p.288.

⁵¹ Chelsea-Anne Saxby, 'Making Love on British Telly: Watching Sex, Bodies and Intimate Lives in the Long 1970s', PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2020, pp.36-37.

the frequently unknowable nature of advice literature readership, and the practice of imagining that publishers and authors engaged with. This follows recent work by Matthew Wale who has explored how ‘imagined communities of readers’ were constructed in the context of scientific knowledge communication, underpinned by earlier theorising from Benedict Anderson.⁵² Where I have found direct evidence to expand discussions of who read advice books beyond the current historiography—for instance, in Chapter Three where I work with the circulation of braille advice literature and Chapter Five which looks in-depth at Dr Helena Wright’s correspondence from former patients—I have done so. However, in many cases, evidence of readership for advice books is inconsistent, thus piecing together disparate archives to tell a story about who likely encountered advice literature, where, and how is necessary. This is most obviously my approach in Chapter Four which explores advertising and advice in Ireland, and Chapter Three looking at spaces and places of access including department stores in London, bookshops in England, and the public library system in Britain.

Many studies of advice culture have focused on specific class, gender, and more recently, age demographics and geographical variations of readership. For example, scholarship by Evelyn Faulkner, Lara L. Fraser, and Ellen M. Holtzman has investigated the marital and sexual experiences of middle- and working-class women using the Stopes correspondence.⁵³ Expanding on this, Lesley Hall’s work on men’s written correspondence with Stopes has emphasised the anxieties and challenges to masculinity navigated but also produced through

⁵² Matthew Wale, *Making Entomologists: How Periodicals Shaped Scientific Communities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Pittsburgh, 2022), p.6; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London, 2016).

⁵³ Faulkner, “Powerless to prevent him”, pp.51-62; Fraser, ‘The Perfect Union’; Holtzman, ‘The Pursuit of Married Love’, pp.39-51.

engagements with advice culture.⁵⁴ More recently, Hannah Charnock has centred age, looking at how teenage girls received sexual knowledges and experienced the process of socio-sexual change in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁵⁵ Sophie Turbutt's important intervention has encouraged us to explore the reception of advice by the likes of Stopes beyond the geographical boundaries of Britain, considering its reception in the Spanish anarchist press in the 1930s, for instance.⁵⁶

In this thesis, I continue efforts to demarcate and give shape to our understanding of advice readership and audience, whilst departing from these existing approaches. To do so, I define the scope of the audience by their relationship to marital, sexual, and contraceptive knowledge. Throughout sections where I explore engagement with advice culture, I have analysed letters produced by individuals writing in a personal capacity who ostensibly had no formal connections to sexological research or the medical and scientific professions more broadly. This mirrors Ruby Ray Daily's selection method for her analysis of Alfred Kinsey's British world correspondence, whereby she drew on letters only from those 'who were writing as private individuals rather than medical or sexological experts.'⁵⁷ Doing so has allowed me to examine a range of gendered, classed, age-based, and nationally specific engagements with advice by individuals whose relationships to it are primarily as readers, advice-seekers, or patients. Whilst

⁵⁴ Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*.

⁵⁵ Hannah Charnock, 'Teenage Girls, Female Friendship and the Making of the Sexual Revolution in England, 1950-1980', *The Historical Journal*, 63:4 (2020), pp.1032-1053; Hannah Charnock, "'How Far Should We Go?': Adolescent Sexual Activity and Understandings of the Sexual Life Cycle in Postwar Britain', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 32:3 (2023), pp.245-268.

⁵⁶ Sophie Turbutt, 'Sexual Revolution and the Spanish Anarchist Press: Bodies, Birth Control, and Free Love in the 1930s Advice Columns of La Revista Blanca', *Contemporary European History* (2022), pp.1-19.

⁵⁷ Ruby Ray Daily, "'Dear Dr K': Mobility, Sex, and Selfhood in Alfred Kinsey's British World Correspondence, 1948-58', *Twentieth Century British History*, 32:1 (2021), p.28.

it is difficult to claim these sources as representative of wider engagements and experiences, defining the audience in this way enables me to deconstruct the boundaries between different levels of knowledge and the identity of the ‘sex expert’, and map the intricacies of knowledge production and reception as it filtered through advice literature.

Popularisation and ‘Sexpertise’

Developing this, it is therefore important to consider not only who came into contact with advice literature, but the mechanics of the process of knowledge circulation itself—how and where people encountered these books mattered, in other words. The publishers and authors populating this thesis saw the production of advice books as an exercise in translating elite, scientific, medical, and sexological information about bodies, sex, and desires to a lay or non-expert reading public. This ‘popularisation’ model, whereby knowledge was spread hierarchically from ‘experts’ to ‘lay’ or non-expert audiences, has been salient in wider histories of scientific communication.⁵⁸ It has also been used to frame the circulation of sexual knowledges, especially through suggestions that men were ‘creators’ of scientific knowledge about sex and women were simply ‘popularisers’ of it. For instance, this assumption has appeared frequently in work on Stopes, implying that she simply ‘popularised’ the work of male sexologists such as Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis.⁵⁹ Popular histories of sexual culture

⁵⁸ See Peter J. Bowler, *Science for All: The Popularization of Science in Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2009); Stephen Hilgartner, ‘The Dominant View of Popularisation: Conceptual Problems, Political Uses’, *Social Studies of Science*, 20 (1990), pp.519-539; Greg Myers, ‘Discourse Studies of Scientific Popularisation: Questioning the Boundaries’, *Discourse Studies*, 5 (2003), pp. 265-279; Ralph O’Connor, ‘Reflections on Popular Science in Britain: Genres, Categories, and Historians’, *Isis*, 100:2 (2009), pp.333-345; Katy Price, *Loving Faster Than Light: Romance and Readers in Einstein’s Universe* (Chicago, 2012), pp.7-10.

⁵⁹ See Collins, *Modern Love*, pp.37-38; Sigel, *Making Modern Love*, p.3; Geppert, ‘Divine Sex’, pp.389-433; Neushul, ‘Marie C. Stopes’, pp.245-272.

in Britain have towed this line too. For instance, Peter Doggett's recent book somewhat dismissively argued that a 'female guide to women's sexual matters' was 'unusual': he has asserted that 'most experts were, obviously, men.'⁶⁰ This simplistic contention has grown especially scholarship on sexology in the second half of the nineteenth century, within which the exclusion or lack of acknowledgement of women's contributions to the field has recently been critiqued by Katie Sutton and Kristen Leng.⁶¹

The rise of 'sexpertise' or the 'sex expert' as a legitimate source of sexual knowledge in the twentieth century as the relationship between sex and science was solidifying is thus a well-trodden subject. In the British context, historians have shown that experts defined the boundaries of knowledge in attempts to revolutionise public understandings of sex from the interwar period, whilst in the Irish context, accounts of Catholic and governmental repression of sexuality have located official and institutional understandings of sex as dominant.⁶² However, scrutiny of this model from the likes of Doan and Katherine Jones have questioned its relevance. Doan has suggested that the complexities of knowledge 'ventilation' are not reflected in this modelling, making it a 'blunt instrument' that overshadows women as knowledge producers, whilst Jones has shown that as the century drew on, personal experience and subjectivity became important sources of sexual knowledge, shifting legitimacy away from 'traditional' forms of 'sexpertise'.⁶³

⁶⁰ Peter Doggett, *Growing Up: Sex in the Sixties* (London, 2021), p.67.

⁶¹ Katie Sutton and Kristen Leng, 'Forum Introduction: Rethinking the Gendered History of Sexology', *Gender & History*, 31:2 (2019), pp.256-265.

⁶² Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp.176-177; Harry G. Cocks, 'Saucy Stories: Pornography, sexology and the marketing of sexual knowledge in Britain, c. 1918-70', *Social History*, 29:4 (2004), p.467; Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Sexuality in Modern Ireland* (London, 2009).

⁶³ Doan, 'Troubling Popularisation', pp.304-318. See also Doan, 'Marie Stopes's Wonderful Rhythm Charts', pp.595-620. Katherine Jones, 'Claims to (S)expertise in the British Sex

Recent interventions have continued to illustrate the inadequacies of the ‘popularisation’ model in relation to women’s roles as producers of knowledge. Mo Moulton’s discussion of Charis Frankenburg’s child-rearing books has shown how her advice was not simply a reiteration of the ideas of other male experts but the product of her own expertise.⁶⁴ Caroline Rusterholz’s scholarship has illustrated the instrumental nature of women’s work in producing and spreading family planning advice, whilst Lloyd Meadhbh Houston’s recent work on Irish patient’s correspondence with medical authorities has challenged common assumptions about the levels of knowledge and agency women especially had when attempting to understand and navigate their sexual bodies.⁶⁵ These interventions have illustrated both the loosening of the boundaries of expertise and the broadening of legitimate sources of sexual knowledges, the nuances of which are further highlighted if we explore the production of advice literature and its reception in more depth.

This thesis thus continues to shift the debate away from the unsatisfactory ‘popularisation’ model and push the boundaries of ‘sexpertise’. It focuses on the varied and nuanced ways in which the intended readership of advice literature—those without a background in sexological research—encountered and engaged with sexological discourses. This draws on the concept of

Survey, c. 1960s-1990s’, *Social History of Medicine* (2022), p.2. Jones’s article is part of a forthcoming Special Issue on ‘Sexpertise’ in *Social History of Medicine* edited by Sarah L. Jones, Ben Mechen, and Hannah Charnock.

⁶⁴ Mo Moulton, *The Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and Her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women* (London, 2019), pp.111-129.

⁶⁵ Caroline Rusterholz, *Women’s Medicine: Sex, Family Planning and British Female Doctors in Transnational Perspective, 1920-70* (Manchester, 2020); Lloyd Meadhbh Houston, ‘Dear Dr Kirkpatrick’: recovering Irish experiences of VD, 1924-47’ in Anne Hanley and Jessica Meyer, (eds), *Patient voices in Britain, 1840-1948* (Manchester, 2021), pp.255-256; Lloyd Meadhbh Houston, *Irish Modernism and the Politics of Sexual Health* (Oxford, 2023).

knowledge co-production, which suggests knowledge was not simply ‘transmitted’, but constructed ‘with its consumers’, as Peter Mandler has argued, and Katy Price and Matthew Wale have subsequently illustrated in recent work on other areas of public scientific discourse.⁶⁶ In doing so, it argues that sexual knowledges were produced not only through the publishing networks that put them into print, but through reader engagements whereby advice and information about sex, bodies, and desires was internalised, reiterated, and ultimately remade in the process of corresponding with perceived authority figures in the realm of sex.

Contextualising Knowledge: Cultural Discourses and Knowledge Production

In this context, it is also important to frame the twentieth century as a moment in which specific types of knowledge about sex, sexuality, and sexual behaviours were being produced by ‘sex experts’ and others seeking to draw the boundaries of respectability within sexual relationships. These boundaries were defined and redefined by context and paratext, moulding the types of knowledges produced for public consumption. Throughout this thesis, this is illuminated by the interplay between conceptualisations of respectability and several distinctive yet connected discourses that permeated the cultural landscape of twentieth-century Britain, Ireland, and beyond.

First, the attempted identification of heterosexuality and homosexuality as discrete identities associated with particular practices and behaviours is a product of this period, as argued by a

⁶⁶ Peter Mandler, ‘Good Reading for the Million: The ‘Paperback Revolution’ and the Co-Production of Academic Knowledge in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain and America’, *Past & Present*, 244 (2019), pp.236-237; Price, *Loving Faster Than Light*; Wale, *Making Entomologists*.

number of historians, in which advice literature had a meaningfully defining role.⁶⁷ However, as Matt Houlbrook has illustrated from the perspective of men's sexual encounters with other men being labelled as 'queer', these identities were unstable and identification of 'normal' heterosexuality was fraught.⁶⁸ This thesis therefore explores how 'sex experts' and their publishers worked to delineate and produce knowledges about bodies, sex, and desires in advice publications that both directly and indirectly intervened in the invention of the perceived binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In doing so, I build on older scholarship that has investigated—and called for the investigation of—the production of such identities in the twentieth century.⁶⁹ I show that infrequently explored exchanges in publisher's correspondence and reader's reports were sites in and through which the boundaries of such identities were being drawn—not always successfully—and written and rewritten in terms to be consumed and understood by public readerships.

Second, the relevance of religion and faith to ideas about sex, bodies, desires, and relationships is unavoidable. Daniel Loss has proposed that although the grand narrative of the secularisation of Europe would suggest the diminishing importance of religion as the century drew on, prior to the 1960s especially, the 'institutional afterlife' of religious denominations remained strong.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ For examples, see Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, first published 1995 (Chicago, 2007); Laura Doan, "A peculiarly obscure subject": the missing 'case' of the heterosexual' in Brian Lewis, (ed), *British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives* (Manchester, 2013), pp.87-108.

⁶⁸ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago, 2005), pp.181-182.

⁶⁹ Examples of this include: Doan, "A peculiarly obscure subject", pp.87-108; David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York, 1990), pp.15-53; Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, first published 1990 (Berkeley, 2008), pp.1-66.

⁷⁰ Daniel Loss, 'The Institutional Afterlife of Christian England', *The Journal of Modern History*, 89:2 (2017), pp.282-284.

As he and others such as Matthew Grimley have argued, Christian teachings maintained a strong cultural legacy in England.⁷¹ In Southern Ireland, Cara Delay has emphasised the importance of Catholic practices in cultural life, whilst Louise Fuller has argued that the Catholic Church had consolidated ‘vast power and influence’ by the time of Irish independence in 1922, building itself into the ‘vitals’ of the nation through its involvement in the state, education, health, social welfare, and the cultural landscape.⁷² Ireland—both Southern and Northern—has often been seen as an exception to perceived trends of secularisation across the century, as Gladys Ganiel has argued, ‘because religion reinforced and partly constituted’ oppositional and competing Catholic and Protestant national identities.⁷³ This thesis therefore acknowledges the role of religious belief in the IFS, ROI and England in moulding ideas about sex displayed in advice literature and related ephemera, and the ways in which it mediated their circulation and the meanings they held in the broader context of developing sexual culture throughout the century.

Third, religious discourses inspired and interacted with notions of moral purity which seeped into the cultural fabric of the national contexts I foreground. In Britain, the foundations of moral purity were firmly rooted in eugenicist thought fuelled by anxieties over population and national character. Highlighting this, Frank Mort has argued that from the interwar period, ‘Under the banner of social hygiene, moralists, clerics, eugenicists and some feminists joined forces with

⁷¹ Ibid, p.285; Matthew Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England: Liberal Anglican Theories of the State Between the Wars* (Oxford, 2004).

⁷² Cara Delay, ‘Fashion and Faith: Girls and First Holy Communion in Twentieth-Century Ireland (c. 1920-1970)’, *Religions*, 12:7 (2021), pp.518-533; Louise Fuller, ‘Religion, Politics and Socio-Cultural Change in Twentieth-Century Ireland’, *The European Legacy*, 10:1 (2005), p.41.

⁷³ Gladys Ganiel, ‘Secularisation, Ecumenism, and Identity on the Island of Ireland’ in John Carter Wood, (ed), *Christianity and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Bristol, CT, 2016), p.73.

medics to resurrect a dialogue between medicine and morality.’⁷⁴ Developing medical and scientific ideas about bodies, sex, and desire were reconceptualised in line with evolving emphasis on health and hygiene.⁷⁵ I show in Chapters One and Two how this explicitly shaped the content of advice literature, especially in the interwar years.⁷⁶ In Ireland, understandings of moral purity were central to the definition of a distinctive Irish national identity—set apart in clear terms from British identity. This was ‘a task undertaken through recourse to themes of purity, chastity, and virtue’ that placed particular emphasis on ‘women’s sexual purity’ as the foundation of the nation, Clara Fischer has noted.⁷⁷ In light of this, in Chapter Four especially, I demonstrate how state, legal, and individual responses to encounters with advice culture filtered through the lens of moral purity intimately tied to religious beliefs and nationalist discourses.

Conceptualising Access: Materiality, Spaces, Senses

Connected to issues of audience, readership, and the shape and movement of knowledges, I nuance definitions of access to expand historical understandings of the subtle and varied ways in which sexual knowledges were encountered. Generally, questions of how readers accessed advice books have hinged on the assumption—which has often been substantiated—that censorship and cultural taboos surrounding discussions of sex meant these publications often had to be sought out furtively or were difficult to encounter in public settings especially. For

⁷⁴ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-moral politics in England since 1830*, second edition (London, 2000), p.302.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Clara Fischer, ‘Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame: Magdalen Laundries and the Institutionalization of Feminine Transgression in Modern Ireland’, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41:4 (2016), p.822.

example, over twenty years ago, Porter and Hall asked: ‘How did ordinary individuals acquire such knowledge or misinformation as they had about sex, and how easy was it for them to gain the information?’.⁷⁸ Their analysis emphasised the ‘sordid’ and ‘salacious’ means through which books about sex were available, arguing that libraries and booksellers either refused to stock them or controlled access very strictly, even into the 1930s when these publications were increasingly common. However, their claim that librarians kept advice books out of sight and made them available only to a few selected readers came from information provided by ‘librarian friends’ and was not elaborated on with other source material in their volume.⁷⁹ The state of the literature in this area therefore echoes Doan’s argument that ‘when the focus shifts to the ‘spread of sexology’ to ordinary women and men, the process of public dissemination eludes scrutiny’.⁸⁰

In response to this critique, my thesis thus takes new approaches to conceptualising everyday encounters with sexual knowledges in advice literature, drawing on advances in material, spatial, and sensory histories to frame the phenomenology—or the embodied and emotional experience—of access. Books took on multiple and differing meanings not only because of the knowledges they contained, but where and how they were encountered in varied, nationally specific yet interrelated contexts. Interactions with the medical profession, books, advertisements, and other mediums where discourses around sex proliferated were materially situated and often fleeting, becoming part of individual everyday lives. Speaking to this in different contexts, feminist historians such as Lucy Delap and Margaretta Jolly have called for more emphasis on the spaces and places in and through which books and ultimately ideas

⁷⁸ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p.248.

⁷⁹ Ibid, pp.256-257, 259-261.

⁸⁰ Doan, ‘Troubling Popularisation’, p.308.

circulated, as doing so broadens the boundaries of encounters that were often ‘fluid and hard to categorise’.⁸¹ Exemplifying how this can be done, spatial histories have emphasised the materiality of space to render it a tool for analysis, whilst cultural historians have begun to take seriously the importance of space and place in the building of intellectual communities, the circulation of ideas, and the shaping of emotional experiences.⁸²

Despite this important work, how encounters with advice books felt in both embodied and emotional senses is an area of investigation that has eluded histories of advice literature. This has left inconsistencies in our understanding of experiences of access, despite questions surrounding this being present since the earliest academic interventions in this area. As Adams and Barker have stipulated more broadly, reception is one of the most difficult aspects of book histories because ‘for many of the recipients it remains mute since they leave no direct record of their reactions, if any.’⁸³ Bringing material and spatial histories into conversation with ‘sense-specific’ and ‘inter-sensory’ histories that provide tools for understanding the relationship between the embodied and material world, this thesis therefore seeks to foreground those fleeting moments of interaction with sexual knowledges that cannot, in the words of Alice

⁸¹ Lucy Delap, ‘Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women’s Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974-2000’, *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), pp.171, 191; Margaretta Jolly, ‘Recognising Place, Space and Nation in Researching Women’s Movements: Sisterhood and After’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 35 (2012), pp.144-146.

⁸² Leif Jerram, ‘Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?’, *History and Theory*, 52:3 (2013), pp. 400-419; Ralph Kingston, ‘Mind Over Matter? History and the Spatial Turn’, *Cultural and Social History*, 7:1 (2010), pp.111-121; Christopher Hilliard, ‘The Literary Underground of 1920s London’, *Social History*, 33:2 (2008), pp.164-182; Stephen Brooke, ‘Space, Emotions and the Everyday: The Affective Ecology of 1980s London’, *Twentieth-Century British History*, 28:1 (2017), pp.110-142; Laura C. Forster, ‘The Paris Commune in London and the Spatial History of Ideas, 1871-1900’, *The Historical Journal*, 62:4 (2019), pp.1021-1044.

⁸³ Adams and Barker, ‘A New Model for the Study of the Book’, p.27.

Garner, ‘easily be communicated or preserved beyond the moment of their happening.’⁸⁴ This also enables the recognition that access was mediated within and through different bodies, highlighting the variability of these moments of encounter especially in relation to disabled people’s experiences, which have more often than not been excluded from histories of sex, as well as histories more widely.⁸⁵ In doing so, it challenges the assumption by some book historians, including Adams and Barker, that reception is ‘initially, a passive thing’, because of a perceived lack of evidence in the archives.⁸⁶

Additionally, I look beyond Britain to Ireland to emphasise the variance in what it could mean to access sexual knowledges in different formats, raising questions about access to marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice in broader geographical terms. This comparison is significant because of the emergence of a market for imported literature in the Irish context across the twentieth century and the porosity of national borders with regards to the movement of people; the availability of commercial products proliferated as a result. The encompassing and religiously-driven nature of the state controls on the publication and circulation of information about sex and contraception in particular in Ireland throughout the period between 1930 and the 1950s made accessing advice publications considerably more difficult.⁸⁷ By examining the scope and limitations of censorship as it related to advice literature, and reorienting the

⁸⁴ Mark M. Smith, ‘Preface: Styling Sensory History’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35:4 (2012), p.469; Alice Garner, *The Shifting Shore: Locals, Outsiders, and the Transformation of a French Fishing Town, 1823-2000* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), p.7.

⁸⁵ Tom Shakespeare, Kath Gillespie-Sells, and Dominic Davies, *The Sexual Politics of Disability: Untold Desires* (London, 1996), p.3; Douglas Baynton, ‘Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History’ in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, (eds), *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York, 2001), p.52.

⁸⁶ Adams and Barker, ‘A New Model for the Study of the Book’, p.27.

⁸⁷ Anthony Keating, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Censorship: God, Ireland and the Battle to Extend Censorship Post 1929’, *Estudios Irlandeses*, 9 (2014), pp.67-79.

discussion to focus on what *was* accessible in this context rather than the more prevalent narrative of what was not, I show that definitions of access must be specific and flexible to account for variance in distribution and censorial landscapes within and between different national contexts. The links between Ireland, Britain, and the United States established through transnational forms of consumer culture including department stores, publishing, advertising, and other corporate structures underpinned the movement of ideas about sex, bodies, and desires in subtle, changeable ways. Specifically, Chapter Four draws on recent work exploring how advertising could provide access to bodily and sexual knowledges, and traditional cultural histories that have established interpreting advertisements for their cultural significance and suggestive meanings.⁸⁸

Working with fragmentary source material, these interventions are therefore productive for reading between the lines of suggestive words, phrases, or images in the archive for sensory, embodied, affective, and geographically contingent experiences of access situated within specific spaces and places that are otherwise difficult to render meaningful. Taking these approaches, I show that we must expand the definition of access to include the more fleeting, ephemeral, and incomplete encounters to account for and understand the variable spread of sexual knowledges in and through advice culture.

⁸⁸ For example, see Mark O'Brien, 'Policing the press: censorship, family planning, and the press in Ireland, 1929-67', *Irish Studies Review*, 29:1 (2021), pp.15-30; Stephanie Rains, "'No irregularity or obstruction can resist them': advertising of abortion pills in the Irish press, 1890-1930", *Irish Studies Review*, 29:4 (2021), pp.407-424; Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1994).

Reading Advice and Fashioning the Self in Letter Writing

Additionally, this thesis contributes to understanding the relationship between advice literature and the interiorised modern 'self' by exploring the ways in which readers and others who encountered advice culture responded to it in letter writing. Drawing on Jeffrey Weeks' argument, I show that writing about sex to different authorities was not only expressive, but also constitutive—advice culture provided the context and language for individuals to explore, explain, and organise understandings of themselves as sexual subjects and of their relationships too.⁸⁹ As argued by a number of historians including Claire Langhamer, Matt Houlbrook, Anna Clark, and Carolyn Steedman, the self was increasingly characterised and understood through the 'language of interiority', with the interwar years as a formative moment when the popularity of psychoanalytic theories encouraged self-reflection.⁹⁰ As Houlbrook has shown, an overreliance on 'elite sources' has overdetermined understandings of how individuals internalised and negotiated the self in this shifting context.⁹¹ Building on this argument, this thesis takes seriously letter writing from individuals encountering advice culture in different ways as exercises in self-fashioning, looking to examples of such writing in smaller or less used archives to do so.

⁸⁹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge, 2000), p.2.

⁹⁰ Claire Langhamer, 'Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 9:2 (2012), p.278; Matt Houlbrook, "'A Pin to See the Peepshow": Culture, Fiction and Selfhood in Edith Thompson's Letters, 1921-22', *Past and Present*, 207 (2019), pp.215-249; Matt Houlbrook, 'Commodifying the Self Within: Ghosts, Libels, and the Crook Life Story in Interwar Britain', *The Journal of Modern History*, 85:2 (2013), p.321-363; Anna Clark, *Alternative Histories of the Self: A Cultural History of Sexuality and Secrets, 1762-1917* (London, 2017); Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), p.4.

⁹¹ Houlbrook, 'Commodifying the Self Within', p.325.

To frame this, letter writing is conceptualised as a psychological exercise used to navigate and fashion the self in different ways, as in Michael Roper's work that has suggested how writing contributed to 'an elaborated sense of interiority', and was thus an exercise in the transforming 'the psychic reality'.⁹² Early interventions using the Stopes correspondence implicitly engaged with this concept, exploring the navigation of marital, contraceptive, and sexual anxieties and the management of sexual problems in particular in letters.⁹³ Recent work by Lisa Sigel, Ruby Ray Daily, and Adrian Bingham has more directly examined the ways in which the dual practices of reading and writing allowed individuals to 'rewrite themselves' through their engagement with sexual knowledges, rendering advice culture a space to negotiate embodied and emotional experiences of sex.⁹⁴ However, we must be careful to acknowledge that the self in letter writing was mediated because of the deliberate and curated nature and the different purposes letters served.⁹⁵ As Ken Plummer has argued in relation to oral histories, the narratives of sexual life expressed in correspondence cannot be analysed as if they access 'sexual truth',

⁹² Michael Roper, 'Splitting in Unsent Letters: Writing as a Social Practice and a Psychological Activity', *Social History*, 26:3 (2001), pp.319-321. See also Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word* (London, 1982), pp.101, 82.

⁹³ Davey, 'Birth Control in Britain', pp.329-345; Holtzman, 'The Pursuit of Married Love', pp.39-51; Faulkner, "Powerless to prevent him", pp.51-61; Fraser, 'The Perfect Union'; Katherine Holden, 'Nature takes no notice of morality': singleness and *Married Love* in interwar Britain', *Women's History Review*, 11:3 (2002), pp.481-503; Lesley Hall, 'Impotent Ghosts from No Man's Land, Flappers' Boyfriends, or Cryptopatriarchs? Men, Sex and Social Change in 1920s Britain', *Social History*, 21:1 (1996) pp.54-70; Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*.

⁹⁴ Sigel, *Making Modern Love*, p.75; Daily, 'Dear Dr K', pp.24-45; Adrian Bingham, 'Newspaper Problem Pages and British Sexual Culture Since 1918', *Media History*, 18:1 (2012), pp.51-63.

⁹⁵ Miriam Dobson, 'Letters' in Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, (eds), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London, 2009), pp.57, 60-64; Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (Columbia, 2008), p.7; Claire Langhamer, 'Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 9:2 (2012), p.278.

but rather they are representative and important for not only the experiences recounted, but the ways in which these experiences were made and re-made.⁹⁶

In Chapters Three, Four and Five, I build on this work by examining letters from both men and women responding to encounters with sexual knowledges in different forms to bring it more acutely into conversation with the described interventions on the psychological properties and functions of letter writing as a tool to negotiate the boundaries of the interiorized self. These chapters emphasise how letter writing became a way to navigate anxieties, insecurities, moral conflicts, and destabilising or disruptive encounters with sex, bodies, and desires. In doing so, I argue that correspondents attempted to alleviate the emotional weight of the self-reflection inspired by and through their contact with emerging sexual discourses.

The function of letter writing as a negotiation of the emotional impact of sexual knowledges is especially apparent in the genre of complaint letters, which appear in both Chapters Three and Five, and are thus worth exploring in more depth here. Complaints have not featured extensively in scholarship on writing to ‘sex experts’. Illustrating this, Ruth Hall’s edited collection of Stopes’s correspondence included just two complaint letters—from a ‘Mr CJ’ that criticised *Married Love* as ‘dirty’ and a ‘Mrs CR’ who complained about Stopes’s birth control advocacy as a contradiction of ‘God’s plan’—in a sample of 300 letters from between 1918 and 1929.⁹⁷ When the concept of complaint does feature in histories of advice culture, it tends to denote the practice of writing about one’s sexual problems, not criticisms of sexual advice itself, as is the

⁹⁶ Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London, 1995), pp.5,16.

⁹⁷ Ruth Hall, *Dear Dr Stopes: Sex in the 1920s* (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp.13, 193.

case in Lisa Sigel's work.⁹⁸ Otherwise, complaint has been seen as of secondary importance to other features of responses to advice literature. Lesley Hall, for example, has mostly dismissed the 'very little' correspondence 'sex experts' like Stopes received that was 'condemnatory or even mildly critical', and whilst both she and Sigel have noted the paradoxical feelings of inadequacy and frustration advice literature could cause for both men and women, neither have considered the language and emotion of complaint as a discretely important feature of the correspondence.⁹⁹ Additionally, Dr Helena Wright's biographer Barbara Evans has recognised that her publications often elicited complaints, but focused more substantively on Wright's proactive responses to this rather than what these complaints consisted of.¹⁰⁰

In wider literature, the nature of complaint has been theorised in more depth, showing how complaint letters functioned to express frustrations at particular life events and navigate power structures, as is the case in the work of Leonie Hannan and Daisy Payling.¹⁰¹ Sara Ahmed's recent intervention has argued that the ambiguous and often unsatisfied outcomes of complaints—within and beyond formalised complaint processes—makes them 'leaky, ghostly, haunting'.¹⁰² Throughout this literature, the emotionally intensive nature of complaint, and its role in asserting stable versions of the self in the face of disruption and discomfort, is emphasised. I therefore take complaints seriously as a response to encounters with sexual

⁹⁸ Sigel, *Making Modern Love*, p.52.

⁹⁹ Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*, p.10; Sigel, *Making Modern Love*, p.52.

¹⁰⁰ Barbara Evans, *Freedom to Choose: The Life and Work of Dr Helena Wright, Pioneer of Contraception* (London, 1984), pp.173-174.

¹⁰¹ Leonie Hannan, *Women of Letters: Gender, writing and the life of the mind in early modern England* (Manchester, 2016), p.97; Daisy Payling, "'The People Who Write to Us Are the People Who Don't Like Us": Class, Gender, and Citizenship in the Survey of Sickness, 1943-1952, *Journal of British Studies*, 59:2 (2020), pp.315-342.

¹⁰² Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham, 2021), pp.257-259.

knowledges, looking at complaint letters specifically to elucidate further the psychological work done by the written letter in the context of advice culture.

Long Histories of Advice Culture and ‘Sexual Revolution’

This thesis, through its focus on concepts of access and readership, treads the unstable boundary between public and private life and builds on scholarship that has investigated the common assertion that sexual discourses were shrouded in silence in the twentieth century. Silence has been a dominant theme in literature on sex and sexuality. Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink, and Katherine Holden notably argued that discussions of ‘sex and contraception’ were taboo and silenced in the context of family life in Britain, whilst Hera Cook’s more recent article on outraged parents’ reactions to the introduction of sex education at a Dronfield school in 1914 argued that ‘mothers embraced the suppression of sexuality and believed their children should be protected from sexual knowledge’, reinforcing the trope of sexual silence.¹⁰³ Irish histories of sex and sexuality have been preoccupied—necessarily, with the strength of state censorship—with questions of regulation, repression, morality, and religion, as is evident in Diarmaid Ferriter’s lengthy contribution.¹⁰⁴ Complicating these narratives of sexual silence, Maria Luddy has exposed how discussions of sex proliferated in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s, but primarily within state attempts at regulation and restriction of sexuality and sexual practices.¹⁰⁵ Kate Fisher’s work on sexual ignorance has also been instrumental in questioning

¹⁰³ Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink, and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830-1960* (New York, 1999), p.249; Hera Cook, ‘Emotion, Bodies, Sexuality and Sex Education in Edwardian England’, *The Historical Journal*, 55:2 (2012), pp.475-495.

¹⁰⁴ Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*.

¹⁰⁵ Maria Luddy, ‘Marriage, Sexuality and the Law in Ireland’ in Eugenio Biagini and Mary Daly, (eds), *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (New York, 2017), p.359.

the extent and functions of silences through illustrating that sexual ignorance was culturally constructed and maintained.¹⁰⁶

Other historians have sought to further these debates already in interventions that provide a helpful framework for understanding the aforementioned ephemeral and variable position of advice literature in sexual culture, and thus further complicating the existence and roles of silence. The theoretical positioning of a ‘grey zone’ or ‘middle ground’ of sexual culture has been employed by multiple scholars including Anna Clark in her use of ‘twilight moments’ and, more recently, Sarah Bull in her work on pornography and scientific sexual knowledges, amongst others.¹⁰⁷ The positioning of the sexual as such makes sense because, as Jeffrey Weeks has argued, it ‘touches on so many disparate areas of individual and social existence’ which, I add, includes spaces and encounters that have not yet been explored as sites for the making of sexual culture in the twentieth century.¹⁰⁸ These broadly similar conceptualisations of the ephemeral and pervasive nature of the sexual therefore suggest that sexual culture occupied an uneasy, unstable position within wider cultural landscapes, where it could hold a multiplicity of meanings. By recognising that—through complicated, messy ways in which it was created, accessed, engaged with, and internalised—advice literature occupied a liminal space between public and private, respectable and taboo, the ephemeral and fleeting yet pervasive nature of

¹⁰⁶ Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford, 2006), p.5; Kate Fisher, ‘Modern Ignorance’ in Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming and Lauren Kassell, (eds), *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 2018), pp.471-484.

¹⁰⁷ Anna Clark, ‘Twilight Moments’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14:1-2 (2005), pp.139-160; Bull, ‘Obscenity and the publication of sexual science, pp.iii, 1-3. See also Peter Bailey, ‘Parasexuality and Glamour: the Victorian Barmaid as Cultural Prototype’, *Gender & History*, 2:2 (1990), pp.148-172.

¹⁰⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge, 2000), p.163.

the sexual in everyday life that moulded how sexual knowledges circulated and were received is elucidated.

Through employing this framework, this thesis engages in debates surrounding the concept of 'sexual revolution' in the twentieth century. The simplistic narrative of a 'revolution' in sexual culture occurring in the 1960s and 1970s in Britain and beyond has been debated and challenged by a number of historians since the 1980s, although broadly the scholarship agrees that a significant shift did take place across the century as a whole.¹⁰⁹ Some historians have continued to frame the 1960s as a distinct yet incomplete turning point, such as Hera Cook, Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, whilst others have pushed back against the claim of a newly 'permissive' society in this decade.¹¹⁰ Taking this critique further, Frank Mort's assessment has framed the 1960s as a decade of contradiction rooted in cultural changes of the interwar years up to the 1950s, placing emphasis on changing patterns of mass consumption as a driver of shifts in sexual culture, whilst rejecting understanding this within a linear narrative of progress.¹¹¹ To buttress this, Mort and Marcus Collins have argued that the 'afterlives' of Victorian sexual mores were present across the twentieth century, something not straightforwardly replaced by

¹⁰⁹ For example, see Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English women, sex, and contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford, 2004), pp.271-317; Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*; Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven, 2010); Frank Mort, 'The Ben Pimlott Memorial Lecture 2010: The Permissive Society Revisited', *Twentieth-Century British History*, 22:2 (2011), pp.269-298; Weeks, *Making Sexual History*, pp.163-178.

¹¹⁰ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, pp.338-340; Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963* (Cambridge, 2010), pp.48-49; Marcus Collins, (ed), *The Permissive Society and its Enemies: Sixties British Culture* (London, 2007).

¹¹¹ Frank Mort, 'Striptease: The erotic female body and live sexual entertainment in mid-twentieth-century London', *Social History*, 32:1 (2007), pp.29-53. See also Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers?: Sex, private life, and the British popular press, 1918-1978* (Oxford, 2009), pp.12-14, 265-267.

‘modern’ conceptualisations of marriage and sexual relationships, and further complicated by the tensions, pressures, and anxieties caused by sexual change in the 1960s.¹¹²

In the Irish context, there has been a more enduring reliance on the teleology of sexual repression to liberalisation. Formative work from historians such as Tom Inglis and Chrystel Hug—and more recently Ferriter and Luddy—has hinged on the Catholic Church and state as an enforcer of sexual repression and silence, with an ‘opening up’ of society from the 1960s pushing change.¹¹³ Whilst there has been some variation in these arguments including locating the bigger shifts in later decades, the narrative has remained.¹¹⁴ As a corrective to the more rigid narratives, Michael Cronin has argued that the system of regulating sexuality was deeply complex, pointing towards the Catholic Church’s use of marital advice in the 1940s and 1950s to define a new Catholicised sexuality that was fitting with modern capitalist Ireland’s experiences. Cronin suggested that the 1960s saw innovative developments in how the Church dealt with sexuality, but it was still very much within the bounds of Catholicism.¹¹⁵ His argument highlighted the teleology of change in Ireland as simplistic, just as Mort and others had done in Britain.

¹¹² Frank Mort, ‘Victorian Afterlives: Sexuality and identity in the 1960s and 1970s’, *History Workshop Journal*, 82:1 (2016), pp.199-212; Collins, *Modern Love*, pp.1-9, 169-173.

¹¹³ Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 1987); Chrystel Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland* (London, 1999); Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*.

¹¹⁴ See Hug, *Politics of Sexual Morality*, p.1; Dagmar Herzog, ‘Sexuality in the Postwar West’, *Journal of Modern History*, 78:1 (2006), pp. 154-156; Ann Nolan and Shane Butler, ‘AIDS, Sexual Health and the Catholic Church in 1980s Ireland: A Public Health Paradox?’, *Public Health Then and Now*, 108:7 (2018), pp.908-913.

¹¹⁵ Michael Cronin, *Impure Thoughts: Sexuality, Catholicism and Literature in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Manchester, 2012), pp.114-118.

In both contexts, then, this thesis complicates the teleology of sexual change through exploring the complicated, and iterative process of the creation and circulation of sexual knowledges in advice literature. It places significance on the interwar period as an important moment for the development of sexual culture to push back against narratives of transformative change in the latter half of the century. To develop this, the final chapter of this thesis turns to the ‘afterlives’ of advice literature, to co-opt Mort’s phrasing.¹¹⁶ In particular, it examines how the narrative of sexual change was constructed within and through biographies of ‘sex experts’, as well as by patients in the act of telling sexual stories about their own lives in letter writing, a concept derived from Plummer’s oral history analysis in *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995).¹¹⁷ The teleology of ‘sexual revolution’ is therefore also complicated by considering the ways in which stories of sexual change have been extrapolated and relied upon as a tool to write and rewrite the self and individual sexual experiences, and the implications this has for our broader understandings of how consuming and transformational shifts in sexual culture were across the century.

Sources and Methods

The subject of this thesis requires a wide range of archival material to piece together the story of the markets, networks, and mediating institutions and individuals behind the creation, diffusion, and reception of published advice literature. As my investigation has grown from the exploration of publishing networks as a starting point, a large proportion of primary sources come from the George Allen & Unwin (A&U) collection at the University of Reading Special Collections. Many of the stories in the correspondence and ephemera in this collection have

¹¹⁶ Mort, ‘Victorian Afterlives’, pp.199-212.

¹¹⁷ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p.6.

been told and retold in memoirs of the Unwin family themselves, also used in this thesis.¹¹⁸ The term ‘memoir’ is used here as, by Robert Folkenflik’s definition, it includes autobiography, biography, and ‘events recounted from personal knowledge’, providing expansive terminology to recognise the varied nature of the Unwin family’s publications.¹¹⁹ To add to these sources, various histories of publishing and books have also included reference to A&U. They, even if only in brief, have repeatedly drawn on this archive and related sources owing to A&U’s position as one of the most prominent publishers of the twentieth century, and the extensive nature of its records.¹²⁰ However, as archivist Brian Ryder has noted, ‘the collection still manages to come up with surprises’.¹²¹ This is certainly the case for studying the production of advice literature, where the correspondence between ‘sex experts’, publishers, and book distributors has not yet been extensively used as per my approach. In part, this is because of the fragmentary, dispersed nature of publishers’ records, many of which have been divided between archives, sold to private collectors, and curated to reflect the interests of publishers.

¹¹⁸ The Unwin family’s memoirs, in order published from oldest to most recent, include: Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About Publishing*, third edition (London, 1929); Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About A Publisher: An Autobiographical Record* (London, 1960); Philip Unwin, *The Printing Unwins: A Short History of the Unwin Brothers, The Gresham Press, 1826-1976* (London, 1976); David Unwin, *Fifty Years With Father: A Relationship* (London, 1982); Rayner Unwin, ‘Publishing Tolkien’, *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, 33, Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference: Keble College, Oxford, 1992 (1995), pp.26-29; Rayner Unwin, *George Allen & Unwin: A Remembrancer* (Ludlow, 1999).

¹¹⁹ Robert Folkenflik, ‘Chapter 9 - ‘Written by herself’: British women’s autobiography in the eighteenth century’ in Adam Smyth, (ed), *A History of Autobiography* (Cambridge, 2016), pp.119-120.

¹²⁰ For examples, see: Feather, *British Publishing*, pp.165-166; Stevenson, *Book Makers*, pp.50-55. Often, A&U are remembered for their publishing of J.R.R. Tolkien’s children’s fantasy epic, *The Hobbit* (1937) and subsequent trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955). For example, see Finkelstein and McCleery, *Introduction to Book Histories*, pp.1-2.

¹²¹ Brian Ryder, ‘The George Allen & Unwin Collection: Reading University Library’, *Publishing History*, 47 (2000), p.77.

Thus I began my search of the huge A&U archive, numbering an estimated over a million-and-a-half pieces of paper, for names of prominent ‘sex experts’ who had written advice books across the twentieth century from 1918, when *Married Love* entered the market as one of the first modern best-sellers dealing with sex advice.¹²² Methodologically, this made sense because A&U had filed their paperwork annually by individual correspondents, making it relatively straightforward to trace author communications over a number of decades. As archivist Brian Ryder noted, this organisation style was relatively unique to A&U, as most publisher papers in the Reading archive and at other locations were organised according to individual book titles instead.¹²³ This system therefore turned up a handful of named files for authors who had maintained long-term relationships with A&U, and whose correspondence makes up the bulk of the material used in my first two chapters: Dr Marie Stopes, Dr Norman Haire, Dr Eustace Chesser, and Dr Helena Wright.¹²⁴ Alongside the aforementioned autobiographies and memoirs of A&U, this correspondence—covering from circa 1918 to the late-1960s—enabled the mapping of the intricacies of years’ worth of professional and personal relationships and networks that underpinned the production of advice literature done in Chapters One and Two.

The A&U collection contains around 20,000 reader’s reports written by internal and external manuscript reviewers used by the publisher to deliberate and mediate which books were

¹²² Brian Ryder wrote about the process of cataloguing the A&U collection starting in 1995: Ryder, ‘Allen & Unwin’, *Publishing History*, 47 (2000), pp.67-78. On *Married Love* as one of the first modern best-sellers, see Alexander C.T. Geppert, ‘Divine Sex, Happy Marriage, Regenerated Nation: Marie Stopes’s Marital Manual *Married Love* and the Making of a Best-Seller, 1918-1955’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8:3 (1998), pp.389-433.

¹²³ Ryder, ‘Allen & Unwin’, p.68.

¹²⁴ The correspondence is drawn from University of Reading Special Collections, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Archive, First Series (henceforth: AU FSC) and Correspondence (henceforth: AUC).

published.¹²⁵ Reader's reports were typically short documents that helped to direct publishing decisions, often by filtering out 'awful' manuscripts from the 'slush pile' (unsolicited manuscripts), as Sue Bradley's interviewees from inside the book trade described.¹²⁶ A&U used readers extensively; they were often initially staff or family members, and then specialist external readers were used when a manuscript received was on a 'special subject'.¹²⁷ There has only been limited scholarship using reader's reports, and no in-depth analysis of them with respect to advice literature, as I discuss in Chapter Two.¹²⁸ Searching for 'sex expert' and author names, and titles of books published by the firm that discussed sex, and scanning the files of reports on untraced authors and rejected manuscripts, gave me the basis of primary sources for Chapter Two. I identified thirteen reports on marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice books, eight of which were written by Dr Eustace Chesser, whose relationship with the firm I explore in Chapter One. The identity of reviewers is typically easy to distinguish in the A&U archive, although the thirteen reports are unlikely the full extent of those written by Chesser or those on books about sex more broadly as there are substantial gaps in the company's filing history.¹²⁹ Some of the reviewed books were published, and some pertained to rejected manuscripts. This therefore provided an extremely rich and underacknowledged set of sources for examining the mediating individuals involved in the production of sexual knowledges.

¹²⁵ Ryder, 'Allen & Unwin', p.67. Reader's reports are organised in University of Reading Special Collections, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Archive, Reader's Reports (henceforth: AURR).

¹²⁶ Sue Bradley, (ed), *The British Book Trade: An Oral History* (London, 2008), pp.182-184.

¹²⁷ Ryder, 'Allen & Unwin', p.72; Unwin, *The Truth About Publishing*, p.22.

¹²⁸ Scholarship that has used reader's reports in other archives has included Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), pp.70-97; Andrew Nash, 'A Publisher's Reader on the Verge of Modernity: The Case of Frank Swinnerton', *Book History*, 6 (2003), pp.175-195.

¹²⁹ Ryder, 'Allen & Unwin', p.71.

It is important to recognise the challenges of this source material. As Ryder has noted, Stanley Unwin ‘was an inveterate collector of letters from the hands of the famous’, whilst the two World Wars mark ‘watersheds’ in the collection where filing was inconsistent.¹³⁰ The archive, whilst extensive, likely does not reflect the entirety of A&U’s activities in the realm of publishing sexual knowledges, with processes of selection and preservation shaped around Unwin’s interests and desire to retain what he understood to be the most culturally prestigious records. Moreover, the supplementary materials—memoirs and biographies—have often been rendered tricky sources for the historian. For instance, Stevenson has characterised publishers’ memoirs specifically as self-serving, intended to construct a particular image of the key players in the industry to accrue cultural capital, whilst it is widely acknowledged that autobiography writing was historically a classed and gendered practice, the dominant current of which Liz Stanley has identified as showcasing ‘exemplary lives’.¹³¹ This is compounded by the fact that the publishing industry in twentieth-century Britain was very male-dominated, meaning women’s voices and contributions have often been obscured.¹³²

These issues are reflected in the materials used here—all of the autobiographies published are by men in the Unwin family, whilst the Unwin family women only momentarily feature in the

¹³⁰ Ibid, pp.67-68.

¹³¹ Stevenson, *Book Makers*, pp.xvi-xvii; Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester, 1992), pp.11-13. For a general introduction to autobiographies as sources, see David Carlson, ‘Autobiography’ in Benjamin Ziemann and Miriam Dobson, (eds), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London, 2009), pp.175-191. On the intersections of class, gender, and autobiography, see also Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (Oxford, 1991); Folkenflik, ‘Written by herself’, pp. 119-132; David Vincent, ‘Chapter 12 - Working-class autobiography in the nineteenth century’ in Adam Smyth, (ed), *A History of English Autobiography* (Cambridge, 2016), pp.165-178.

¹³² Stevenson recognised that women’s work in publishing has often been completely overshadowed, making it difficult to identify in the archives: Stevenson, *Book Makers*, pp.xvi-xvii.

archive and memoirs. Stanley Unwin's voice is particularly dominant, cementing his exemplary role in the publishing world, and obscuring even the influence of his nephew, Philip, who played a major role in the editorial side of the business. However, being cognizant of these limitations has enabled me to read these sources against the grain to understand the role of memoirs, autobiographies, and the construction of particular identities and memorialisation of events in the production of sexual culture in this period. This not only speaks to why, how, and by whom advice books were produced in a material sense, but the motivations and cultural significance of this process within and beyond the publishing world. Thus although beginning with the A&U archive, this thesis necessarily took on a much more ambitious selection of sources to inform and extrapolate my exploration of it.

To contend with the limitations of the source material described, the next step involved locating further sets of primary sources by following correspondents, phrases, and themes through other archives. For instance, correspondence between A&U and Norman Haire led me to correspondence with book distributors in this archive: Selfridges, Harrods, and W.H. Smith. The W.H. Smith's files, in particular, contain extreme detail of the minute workings of the bookselling industry across the century, however, because this archive is ostensibly incomplete and a primarily commercial record of book circulation, to follow up leads from this material, it was necessary to look elsewhere.¹³³

Chapter Three consequently pieces together a jigsaw of primary sources from diverse archives that have been used to trace patterns of access to advice literature, as the concrete processes and phenomenology of access has been seldom investigated. For instance, Mass-Observation's

¹³³ Ryder, 'Allen & Unwin', pp.70, 67-68.

(MO) social investigations into books and readership in the 1930s and 1940s in the Mass-Observation Online Archive and Historic England’s photographic archive have provided sources that contextualise and visualise the materiality, spatiality, and embodied experience of access to books in this period. This is an important inclusion because, as Constance Classen has argued, sensory experiences are often ‘inferred’—they are frequently taken for granted and only implied in the source material, meaning histories that centre embodied experience must ‘move sideways from a suggestive phrase’.¹³⁴ Bringing together sources that contain observation, written and spoken testimony, and imagery to extrapolate arguments from encounters with books implied in the A&U archive thus adds depth to this exploration of access.

As the most recognisable name in the history of advice literature and someone whose work A&U looked to as a benchmark and example of success in the genre, following Marie Stopes’s correspondence through different archives was a natural progression. The Marie Stopes papers at the Wellcome Collection are the most extensively used of these in wider literature, yet the smaller Penguin Random House author files proved to be the most exciting for this thesis, as letters between Stopes’s publisher G.P. Putnam’s Sons Ltd. and the National Library for the Blind (NLB) in the 1920s raised a whole new direction of disability-focused research around visual impairment, braille, and sex advice. As this set of correspondence was small—only five letters—piecing together the supply of advice literature through the NLB and the wider public library system in Britain between the 1920s and the 1950s required a survey of a number of different archives.

¹³⁴ Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana, 2012), p.xxvii.

These included the British Library's Marie Stopes correspondence, the Birmingham City Archives Oral History Collections, the Birmingham City Council Records, the Birmingham Local Studies Ephemera Collection, and MO's archive again for its 1947 investigation into public perceptions of charity and blindness. I also turned to the British Library's collections of NLB annual reports for the Central and Northern Branches spanning the period, NLB book catalogues from 1937 and 1952, and editions of the activist magazine *The Blind Advocate* also held there to situate the inclusion of advice literature within the NLB. The records of the NLB itself, held at the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) Archive, are closed indefinitely for relocation. There is a lack of impetus from the organisation to re-open this archive in the near future, and due to the institutional processes of stock circulation and selection over the life of the NLB, it is likely that there is little, if anything, that pertains to advice literature in this archive regardless. The difficulties with tracing the NLB's inclusion of advice books through the archives reflects the broader absence of sex in histories of disability and disabled people's experiences. Thus it is not only historically but politically expedient to work with the scattered material that does exist in the archives to give space to marginalised experiences of disability and sexuality.

This point leads to Irish archives as another important location for this study that also contends with historic and historiographical absences, especially in relation to sex, sexuality, and women's voices and experiences.¹³⁵ Resulting from the censorship conditions of the IFS and

¹³⁵ Mary McAuliffe, 'Irish Histories: Gender, Women and Sexualities' in Mary McCauliffe, Katherine O'Donnell and Leeann Lane, *Palgrave Advances in Irish History* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp.191-221; Maria Beville and Sara Dybris McQuaid, 'Speaking of Silence: Comments from an Irish Studies Perspective', *Nordic Irish Studies*, 11:2 (2012), pp.1-20; Jennifer Redmond, Mary McAuliffe, Sandra McAvoy and Sonja Tiernan, (eds), *Sexual Politics in Modern Ireland* (Kildare, 2015), pp.1-15.

later ROI, a substantial amount of the source material available to explore sex and sexuality in the Irish context originates from institutional sources—primarily, the Government and the Catholic Church—meaning there is a productive irony in the way that censorship practices have created an archive of sexual advice literature and its distribution. Enhanced involvement in citizen’s private lives in this period came as a method of controlling national image closely intertwined with sexual morality, thus producing extensive institutional documentation pertaining to the regulation, repression, and management of sex, bodies, and desires.¹³⁶ Thus looking to institutional sources was necessary: Chapter Five draws on Archbishop John Charles McQuaid’s (1940-1972) papers at the Dublin Diocesan Archives and the Department of Justice Censorship of Publication Board papers at the National Archives of Ireland. From these collections, I examine a range of complaint letters written to both institutions with regards to encounters with sexual content in magazines, books, and lecture advertisements.

However, these sources cannot be read alone as they reflect the preoccupations and voices of both the institutional censorship apparatus, and the select citizens who felt strongly enough about sexual content to write complaints. As Diarmaid Ferriter argues in his survey of Irish sexuality history, looking at these papers in isolation can obscure the ‘numerous discourses that were independent of, or in opposition to, the Church’, and flatten the complexities and nuances of sexual experience and thus history in this context.¹³⁷ I have therefore read the complaint letters against the grain to understand the moments of encounter, anxieties, understandings, and

¹³⁶ See Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart, ‘Gender Roles in Ireland since 1740’ in Eugenio Biagini and Mary Daly, (eds), *Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*, pp.312-326; Jennifer Redmond, ‘The politics of Emigrant Bodies: Irish Women’s Sexual Practice in Question’ in Jennifer Redmond, Mary McAuliffe, Sandra McAvoy and Sonja Tiernan, (eds), *Sexual Politics in Modern Ireland* (Kildare, 2015), pp.73-89.

¹³⁷ Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, p.9.

expressions of sexual subjectivities that they contain. Placing them alongside advertisements and articles from newspapers held in the Irish Newspaper Archives and novels that attempt to reconstruct experiences of sexuality in Ireland (for instance, Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* trilogy), Chapter Four therefore produces a framing of the affective meanings of accessing sexual knowledges in fleeting ways in a context where historiographies have largely been focused on what could not be accessed, rather than what could be. This approach is reminiscent of Tamar Hager's work on photographer Julia Margaret Cameron in the Victorian archive that aimed to 'reconstruct a life of elusive subjectivity' from 'sparse material, archival gaps and silences'—a 'hesitant narrative' formed around open-ended questions posed from archival traces is a productive method in these circumstances.¹³⁸

The final collections of primary sources used pertain to Dr Helena Wright's life, drawn from her personal and work papers and those of her biographer, Barbara Evans at the Wellcome Collection. They include primarily correspondence with readers of Wright's advice books, her former patients around her ninetieth birthday, profiles written at this time and around her centenary, and obituaries from 1982 when she died. The decision to base the final chapter of this thesis around a discrete archive of one 'sex expert' with some supplementary material was made in part because Wright's presence is felt throughout much of the thesis. However, more importantly, my final emphasis is on the role and significance of women 'sex experts' in the long history of advice culture, as much of the first two chapters is centred around male publishers and 'sex experts'. Moreover, Wright's archive over the two collections runs from the 1930s into the late-1980s. This sets it apart from the more comprehensively engaged with

¹³⁸ Tamar Hager, 'Reconstructing subjectivity from silence: Julia Margaret Cameron, Mary Ryan and the Victorian archive', *Women's History Review*, 31:5 (2022), pp.760, 778.

Stopes collection as it goes beyond the period typically considered the ‘sexual revolution’ and contains evidence of how Wright’s ‘sexpertise’ was memorialised and remembered in the latter half of the century and following her death. This enables a *longue durée* approach to the history of advice culture, attentive to the ways in which its significance has been written and rewritten outside of the temporal boundaries of the years in which many readers and patients encountered it.

Overview

The first two chapters of this thesis foreground publisher A&U as an overlooked contributor to the expansion of the sexual, marital, and contraceptive advice genre in twentieth-century Britain and beyond. Chapter One explores how intellectual communities of publishers and ‘sex experts’ drove and facilitated the creation of advice books, considering the motivations for and challenges of their production and distribution between 1918 and the 1950s. Analysing part of the wealth of correspondence left by the firm, I build a comprehensive picture of the role that networks, relationships, and markets had in the process of carving out a space in the marketplace for sexual advice publications.

First, I demonstrate that the firm’s owner, Stanley Unwin, saw advice books as both a political and commercial endeavour, placing him as a key historical actor in the proliferation of the genre. Unwin—through telling and re-telling stories of his relationship to books such as *Married Love* (1918) and *A Young Girl’s Diary* (1921)—consciously positioned himself and his firm as significant in flashpoints in the evolution of British sexual culture. His contorted efforts to do so wrote the narratives of sexual change, in which key male figures played significant

parts, that evolved alongside and in tension with the narratives of pioneering efforts to reimagine sexual culture that placed women ‘sex experts’ at the centre. Following this, I map Stanley Unwin and nephew Philip Unwin’s relationships with important ‘sex experts’—Norman Haire and Eustace Chesser—to give shape to the intellectual communities formed in the publishing world around advice writing. I argue that decentring the ‘sex expert’ by placing them within the complicated mesh of the interwar and post-war publishing world restores publishers as important yet often overshadowed forces in the production and circulation of sexual knowledges. They had significant sway over the contents, form, and circulation of advice books, being fundamental to the establishment of the networks and markets within and through which these texts moved and were encountered.

Chapter Two turns to the process of knowledge production within the publishing process, examining A&U’s reader’s reports, arguing that the publishers’ expert reader was a significant yet until now unrecognised mediator of sexual knowledges in the twentieth century. I illuminate the publishing process as iterative and conversational, challenging hierarchical tropes of knowledge ‘popularisation’ in relation to the translation of sexual science for a public audience. I pay particular attention to the gendered assumptions around women as ‘popularisers’ rather than producers of knowledge, arguing that whilst publishing and sex research has often been characterised as male-dominated, women including gynaecologist and author Dr Helena Wright played fundamental roles in knowledge production and circulation within the publishing process. Viewing sexual knowledges as co-produced between publishers, ‘sex experts’, and other levels of expertise nuances our understanding of how and in what formats sexual knowledges were made available to a public readership through advice literature.

Furthermore, I show how the navigation of censorship in England and abroad, societal taboos around sex, claims to expertise, previous publishing successes, tropes of modernity, assumptions about the national specificity of sexual sensibilities, and the need to render sexual knowledge legitimate and respectable mediated the communication of scientific and medical knowledges about sex. These concerns are surprisingly consistent throughout the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, albeit with shifting parameters as sexual discourses expanded and evolved. Through this analysis, I demonstrate that teleological narratives of change assuming a progression from Victorian repression to ‘sexual revolution’ in the 1960s are unsatisfying in the context of the production of advice books in Britain. Such narratives oversimplify the process and fail to acknowledge the importance of the interwar and immediate post-war years in shaping conversations around sex, bodies, and desires. Suggesting a new direction that places emphasis on the role of publishers and those connected to the publishing process as mediators of sexual knowledges, this chapter therefore illustrates how the production process behind advice books visible in publishing archives was fundamental to how broader sexual culture developed within and through the phenomenon of advice.

The next two chapters hinge on accessing sexual knowledges. Chapter Three uses two case studies of spaces and places of access—retail spaces including Selfridges in London and W.H. Smith’s bookstores across England, and the NLB public library service in the 1930s to the 1950s—to argue that the distribution of advice literature was disparate yet more pervasive than previously recognised. I explore the sensory, spatial, material, and affective phenomenology of access to describe in more concrete ways what it felt like and meant to access information about sex, bodies, and desires in settings that straddled the boundaries between public and private, including retail spaces and public libraries. Throughout, I examine the gendered, classed, and

embodied politics of access through attention to the ways in which advice literature was simultaneously respectable and salacious contingent upon where and by whom it was interacted with.

In particular, I examine the implications of this literature being available in the NLB at a point when disability was primarily understood within the frame of eugenics, and blindness was often rendered a socially unspeakable implication of sexual transgression or a desexualised site of childlike innocence. In doing so, I evoke framings of the ‘grey zone’ or ‘middle ground’ of sexual culture to make sense of the contradictory, multiple, and uneasy ways in which marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice books existed and were encountered within everyday lives in Britain. This chapter thus contributes to the wider, enduring question in histories of advice literature around how, where, and by whom these texts were encountered and read, arguing for a more holistic approach to the available archives that seeks out their ‘imagined’ audience and readership.

Developing this, Chapter Four looks to Ireland between the 1930s and 1950s to argue that definitions of access must be flexible to account for a context where state and church regulation of sexual discourse was more pervasive. This chapter takes a creative approach to the source material in the archives of the Censorship Board and the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin to examine advertising in particular as a significant yet less frequently discussed mode through which individuals encountered advice literature. I examine the censorship apparatus of the IFS and ROI, showing that whilst difficult to procure banned literature, snippets of how individuals accessed sex advice through advertisements populate the archives. I explore advertising as an everyday mode of access in two case studies—Woolworth’s sale of American pulp fiction

magazines and menstrual product advertising in factories—that speak to the ways in which knowledges moved between, within, and through different national contexts. Through this, the involvement of Ireland in transnational markets for advice publications and the contours of these markets are visible. I argue that advertising conveyed ideals of sexuality and sexual behaviour, providing a mediated form of access to sexual knowledges in a context where encounters with sex advice books themselves were not always possible. Throughout this chapter, I consider the nature of complaint letters as a revealing medium through which individuals grappled with understandings of sex, bodies, desires, and sought to rationalise uncomfortable encounters with sexual knowledges. In doing so, this chapter intervenes in expanding historiographies of Irish sexuality with particular attention to the ways in which the religious and censorial context necessitated and fed scattered, incomplete encounters with sexual advice similar to those found in Britain.

Finally, Chapter Five uses a discrete case study of ‘sex expert’ Dr Helena Wright’s archive to examine both reader responses to sexual advice in letter writing in the 1930s to 1950s, and the *longue durée* of advice culture as the century drew on, moving into the 1980s. First, I look at Wright’s legacy as a ‘sex expert’. Examining biographies, obituaries, and other ephemera from 1977 into the 1980s, I deconstruct the ways in which Wright, her publications, and her clinical practice has been written and rewritten towards the end of her life and following her death. Public profiles of Wright created a teleological narrative of sexual change corresponding with her biographical life, tying her career in the birth control movement and her production of sexual advice into this teleology. This illustrates how the ‘afterlives’ of interwar and immediate post-war advice culture are visible in the mythologisation of ‘sex experts’. I then shift perspective to that of readers and patients who engaged with Wright’s advice to understand the

immediate and longer-term emotional impact of advice culture on those who encountered it. I take in turn three sets of correspondence from the archive pertaining to broad themes—advice seeking and the navigation of formative sexual intimacies, complaint, and men’s letter writing and critiquing ‘expert’ knowledge. Finally, I examine the stories of sexual, relational, and reproductive lives told by Wright’s former patients in letters sent for the occasion of her ninetieth birthday. The process of ‘sexual story-telling’ in letter writing to ‘sex experts’ examined here illustrates the long-term impacts of advice culture, both on individuals who encountered it, and on popular narratives of the evolution of British sexual culture across the century. This process of writing was constitutive for former patients and for readers seeking advice in earlier years—it organised and made sense of their sexual lives.

A close reading of Wright’s correspondence, which has not been substantially examined by historians to this point, reveals the ways in which correspondents used letter writing to fashion and understand themselves as sexual subjects, navigate moments of conflict and discomfort, assert their own authorities, and produce their own knowledges about sex. In doing so, this chapter shifts away from the production and circulation of advice to explore the emotional experiences of everyday encounters with advice culture, revealing how the process of engaging with advice allowed readers, patients, and ‘sex experts’ to co-produce knowledge. I therefore argue that interwar and post-war advice culture cannot be understood as existing within a temporal vacuum; we must look beyond the immediate uses of and engagements with sexual, marital, and contraceptive advice to locate its more long-term significance within personal lives and public discourses surrounding sex.

CHAPTER ONE

GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN AND PUBLISHING SEXUAL ADVICE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN

Rejecting *Married Love*

Publisher George Allen & Unwin's (A&U's) involvement with advice literature began with Marie Stopes's *Married Love* (1918), a marital advice book that would quickly become one of Britain's first modern best-sellers.¹ Introduced to the publishing industry through working under his uncle T. Fisher Unwin from 1882, the firm's patriarch Stanley Unwin went on to establish a successful career as one of Britain's most recognisable publishers, setting up A&U through a series of acquisitions.² Much to his regret, Stanley Unwin had been forced to reject Stopes's manuscript. As one of three directors, his decision to do so came after a conflict with another director, C.A. Reynolds:

We were offered for publication at about the same time *Married Love* by Marie Stopes and a novel by an attractive girl, whom Reynolds had interviewed [...]. I saw at once the sales possibilities of *Married Love* and pressed for its acceptance. Reynolds wanted to accept the novel. I examined it and felt sure that in the then state of public opinion we

¹Alexander Geppert, 'Divine Sex, Happy Marriage, Regenerated Nation: Marie Stopes's Marital Manual 'Married Love' and the Making of a Best-Seller, 1918-1955', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8:3 (1998), pp.397-398.

²Frank A. Mumby and Frances H. Stallybrass, *From Swann Sonnenschein to George Allen & Unwin Ltd* (London, 1955), pp.45-47; Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, p.166.

should be prosecuted if we published it. I warned Reynolds of the danger, to which he replied that if we could not publish the novel we could not publish *Married Love*.³

Unwin had been corresponding with Stopes in December 1917, but it unclear exactly when he first received the manuscript of *Married Love*.⁴ According to Unwin, his ‘most difficult colleague’ had offered him an ultimatum to reject the manuscript if he would not publish Rose Allatini’s *Despised and Rejected* (1918), a pacifist novel that dealt with homosexuality.⁵ He went on to bemoan the situation, having declined both books: ‘Of *Married Love* more than a million copies were sold.’⁶ His nephew Philip Unwin later recalled these events in *The Printing Unwins*, a history of the family-owned Gresham Printing Press. He wrote that it was with a ‘certain poetic justice’ that the Unwin Brothers took on a ‘large reprint order almost monthly’ after the tract was first published, meaning that ‘at least the printing—if not the publishing—profits were retained within the family.’⁷

Unwin, despite or perhaps because of his rejection of *Married Love*, kept up intermittent correspondence with Stopes. The years between 1920 and 1938 are sparsely represented in the A&U archive, but nevertheless, later correspondence hints towards the continued relationship

³ Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About A Publisher: An Autobiographical Record* (London, 1960), pp.137-138.

⁴ University of Reading Special Collections, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Papers, First Series (henceforth: AU FSC) AU FSC 32/201 letter from Marie Stopes to Stanley Unwin, 15 December 1917.

⁵ Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, pp.137-138; Rose Allatini’s *Despised and Rejected* was published in 1918 under a pseudonym by C.W. Daniel: A.T. Fitzroy, *Despised and Rejected* (London, 1918).

⁶ Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, p.138.

⁷ Philip Unwin, *The Printing Unwins: A Short History of the Unwin Brothers, The Gresham Press, 1826-1976* (London, 1976), pp.150-153

the author and publisher had.⁸ From discussions of the technicalities of copyright legislation, to arranging lunch plans at the Ritz, and exchanges of reviews and opinions on books about sex, the professional and personal relationship between ‘sex expert’ author and publisher continued until at least 1957, where the trail runs dry before Stopes’s death in 1958.⁹ A&U’s involvement with the advice genre was therefore established at a key cultural flashpoint for its development, something the Unwin family self-consciously positioned themselves in relation to in memoirs throughout their lifetimes. The paper trail of A&U’s pivotal relationship with Stopes—and with other advice authors and ‘sex experts’—remains scattered throughout their archive. Once pieced together, it is revealing of the complicated and reciprocal networks that produced and diffused sexual knowledges this context in Britain and beyond throughout the twentieth century.

Despite many of the academic interventions on—and biographies of—Stopes and her work foregrounding her personal qualities and marketing strategies as reasons for her success with *Married Love*, from this anecdote, the cast of characters behind the scenes who negotiated, shaped, and produced her best-seller is evident.¹⁰ As Richard Espley has noted, there is a tendency to render audiences as passive recipients of books, subsequently obscuring the forces and decisions that shape their physical and intellectual forms.¹¹ However, recent theorising in book histories has emphasised the importance of looking at the lifecycle of a book as a *whole*

⁸ Brian Ryder, ‘The George Allen & Unwin Collection: Reading University Library’, *Publishing History*, 47 (2000), p.70.

⁹ University of Reading Special Collections, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Papers, Correspondence (henceforth: AUC) AUC 477/14; AUC 656/20; AUC 697/4; AUC 778/7. For a biography of Stopes, see Ruth Hall, *Passionate Crusader: The Life of Marie Stopes* (London, 1977).

¹⁰ For examples, see Laura Doan, ‘Marie Stopes’s Wonderful Rhythm Charts: Normalizing the Natural’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 78:4 (2017), pp.389-433.

¹¹ Richard Espley, ‘Alec Craig, Censorship and the Literary Marketplace: A Bookman’s Struggles’ in Nicola Wilson, (ed), *The Book World: Selling and Distributing British Literature, 1900-1940* (Leiden, 2016), p.143.

to understand its bibliographical and cultural significance, something deftly demonstrated in Feely's thesis on the production and circulation of Marx's writings.¹² This chapter's starting point is therefore asking what we gain from decentering the 'sex expert' in histories of advice literature to situate them within and take seriously the complex networks, relationships, and processes that propelled their manuscripts into the British book market. In doing so, it investigates how narratives of the production of advice literature and its growth as a phenomenon across the century have been told. It illustrates the contorted efforts to which key male figures in the publishing industry and medical professionals controlled—or attempted to control—the story surrounding it, inserting themselves into the same story of pioneering change which women 'sex experts' like Stopes and other women also lay claim to.

Using A&U as a case study, this chapter goes on to contextualise the firm's involvement in the publishing of marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice literature. I explore the interwar years as a formative period for Stanley Unwin's personal interest and the company's wider commercial interest in the genre. I show that Unwin's vision and control of publishing activities and his mythologising of his and A&U's involvement with moments such as the publication of *Married Love* painted this period as a significant cultural flashpoint for publishing books about sex in which they played a defining role. I also examine how the legal battles over the anonymous psychoanalytic case study *A Young Girl's Diary* (1921) continued to mould Unwin's approach to the publication of sexual knowledges, highlighting the role of censorship in this. That these events were told and retold in memoirs is significant, as it illustrates how the cultural

¹² Robert Darnton, 'What Is the History of Books?', *Daedalus*, 111:3 (1982), pp.67-69; Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker, 'A New Model for the Study of the Book' in Nicolas Barker, (ed), *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society: The Clark Lectures, 1986-1987* (London, 1993), pp.13-14; Catherine Feely, 'Karl Marx, *Capital* and Radical Book Cultures In Britain, 1881-1945', University of Manchester, PhD thesis, 2011.

meanings and impacts of advice literature and other publications dealing with sex became a tool used by publishers to signal prestige and solidify legacies. I argue that whilst Stanley Unwin and others at A&U wanted to emphasise the personal, political, and progressive motivations behind their involvement in the advice genre, commercial interests were front and centre of their considerations too, leading to sometimes contradictory and inconsistent decisions. The interwar decision-making and interests of publishers therefore had a significant impact on the production of advice literature across the twentieth century in Britain, shaping who produced these knowledges, what they consisted of, and the networks they moved through.

Developing this further, I map the relationships A&U established with two key male ‘sex experts’, Dr Norman Haire and Dr Eustace Chesser, who produced advice books and engaged in other educational efforts for popular audiences between the 1920s and 1950s. Haire’s life and work has been subject to substantive academic intervention yet his foundational relationship with A&U has been peripheral, something I seek to remedy. Chesser’s contributions to advice culture have been less frequently acknowledged. However, the enduring connections he established as Secretary of the Society for Sex Education and Guidance (SSEG)—first with Stanley and then Philip Unwin—reveal the significance of not only his work, but the input and personal interest of key figures in the publishing world in the establishment and evolution of popular sexual knowledges, which is also explored in more depth in Chapter Two. Whilst, often correctly, the archive and historiography privileges Stanley Unwin as the arbiter of A&U’s publishing activities, I reveal through attention to Chesser’s relationship with the firm that his nephew, Philip, had a particularly important role in the production of popular sexual knowledges in the post-war period, when his uncle delegated authors such as Chesser to his management. In doing so, albeit not without challenges, I demonstrate how the relationships

and networks established between publishers and ‘sex experts’ that sustained the publishing of books on sex were fundamental not only to the development of the advice genre, but the frequently unrecognised role of publishing houses as producers, gatekeepers, and distributors of popular sexual knowledges more broadly.

Publisher Memoirs and Sexual Change in Interwar Britain

By retelling the firm’s involvement with Stopes in the early years of the company in their memoirs, Stanley and Philip Unwin mythologised the opportunity to publish for Stopes and the subsequent rejection of *Married Love* as a defining moment for the company in the years to follow. The sense of regret over these events permeated Stanley’s recollections and seeped into stories of the firm’s rise and successes told by his family. For instance, his son Rayner Unwin believed it had a grip on Philip too when he joined the editorial staff in the early-1950s, where his publishing decisions frequently ‘reflected his own personal interests’ and resulted in a range of books on sex education and non-academic psychology. Philip was engaged with ‘the development of books on popular health and medicine’, perhaps in part ‘derived from father’s early disappointment at losing Marie Stopes.’¹³ Under his editorial discernment, the company went on to publish Leslie Tizard’s *Guide to Marriage* (1948) and Max Joseph Exner’s *The Sexual Side of Marriage* (1956), amongst other titles.¹⁴ In these memoirs, therefore, there is a sense of the lasting impact of these early editorial decisions on the firm’s trajectory with books about sex, marking the interwar years as a defining moment for both Stanley and Philip Unwin’s personal interests in this area.

¹³ Rayner Unwin, *George Allen & Unwin: A Remembrancer* (Ludlow, 1999), p.61.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp.25-29; Leslie Tizard, *Guide to Marriage* (London, 1948); Max Joseph Exner, *The Sexual Side of Marriage* (London, 1956).

The ways in which the Unwin family relied on this story to emphasise the notoriety and importance of their company and Stanley's creative and literary prowess is also borne out in these memoirs. Stanley's repeated insistence that he knew immediately the value of *Married Love* and its potential profitability also curated the image of the firm's figurehead as naturally insightful as to the value of manuscripts and commercially aware of which types of books would succeed in the market. This is an image his family and colleagues perpetuated. For instance, Rayner Unwin claimed publishers like his father had 'an intuitive grasp of these things', meaning he 'published according to merit rather than market [...] Editorial choice was assumed to be the instinctive prerogative of the head of the house, or of his most senior colleagues'.¹⁵ This foregrounding of the privileging of intellectual and literary merits and focus on the natural instincts of the publisher as the driver of editorial decisions both diminished the importance of commercial factors and insisted upon the role of the publisher in defining literary taste and success. It illustrates Stevenson's argument that publisher memoirs were self-serving and intended to build a particular image of the key figures they were written by.¹⁶

It is revealing, therefore, that the Unwin family sought to insert themselves into major cultural and literary developments as well as part of these concerted efforts to manage reputation and image. As Philip wrote, the events surrounding *Married Love* took place in a 'pre-permissive' society where the book 'caused quite a stir'—something Stanley was keen to be associated with.¹⁷ Stopes's image as a pioneer of sexual change fit into a teleological narrative of a societal

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Iain Stevenson, *Book Makers: British Publishing in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2010), pp.xvi-xvii.

¹⁷ Unwin, *Printing Unwins*, pp.150-153.

and cultural shift from the Victorian repression of sexuality to a permissive era of sexual liberalisation.¹⁸ Through evoking the permissive society, Philip hinted towards how the Unwins saw the publishing of advice literature as part of this major cultural shift, the involvement with which was beneficial to their business and reputation. Demonstrating this, Stanley Unwin saw the cultural impact of books as enduring and world-changing:

[...] the knowledge that one's name is associated with books that enshrine profound thought and the triumphs of the creative imagination add a fascination to the best publishing. [...] Publishing has far more thrilling adventures to offer the man who is ready to accompany pioneers along fresh paths; eager to help blaze a trail through ignorance and prejudice [...].¹⁹

Whilst discussing publishing more generally, the perceived purpose of the industry for Unwin to push through 'ignorance and prejudice' and act as a 'pioneer' for new ideas resonated with how the purpose of sexual knowledges in advice books were presented. For instance, *Married Love* was prefaced similarly, intended to 'guide' readers through ignorance and 'save' them from 'years of heartache and blind questioning in the dark.'²⁰ The framing of interwar advice literature with the language of sexual liberalisation in this way hints towards why the Unwin family was enthusiastic to retell stories of their connections with Stopes and her work, as it

¹⁸ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-moral politics in England since 1830*, second edition (London, 2000), pp.13-15; Marcus Collins, (ed), *The Permissive Society and its Enemies: Sixties in British Culture* (London, 2007), pp.1-39.

¹⁹ Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About Publishing*, third edition (London, 1929), p.341.

²⁰ Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties*, eighteenth edition (London, 1926), p.xvii.

placed them at the forefront of the trailblazing cultural change that Unwin so clearly considered an important purpose of the publishing industry.

Similarly, other publishing decisions made in the 1920s elucidate this position further. One of two books that got Stanley Unwin ‘into trouble’ with the legal system in the 1920s was *A Young Girl’s Diary*—an anonymous German diary first translated into English by Eden and Cedar Paul and prefaced with a letter by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud.²¹ It came to the attention of Sir Archibald Bodkin, then Director of Public Prosecutions, for its inclusion of moments of sexual intimacy:

[...] there was one entry, essential to the whole because it so influenced the girl’s later life, which describes what the child had seen from a top floor window in a bedroom opposite. From that moment the child’s mind was obsessed by what appeared to her as the cruelty of a big man to a small woman.²²

The incident described here did feature in the book, including a description of a sexually intimate couple, although barely. However, there are multiple instances before this where the girl discussed sex, for example, she learnt ‘how babies come’ and expressed her fears of what ‘one has to do’ when married, as well as repeatedly writing on her curiosities about sex.²³ Bodkin saw the book as obscene and unfit for the general public, placing restrictions on its sale including booksellers gathering the name, address, and occupation of customers before the

²¹ Anonymous, *A Young Girl’s Diary, Prefaced with a Letter by Sigmund Freud*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York, 1921); Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, p.170.

²² Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, p.171.

²³ Anonymous, *A Young Girl’s Diary*, pp.123-124, 34-35, 38, 41, 102-103, 120-121.

publisher could supply them with a copy.²⁴ Unwin's discussion of this incident in his memoir contextualised the uneasy position of books dealing with sex:

How many of the present generation, I wonder, are aware that before the First World War a publisher ran grave risks if he even mentioned the existence of venereal diseases in a book intended for the general public? [...] Our ideas in these matters change from generation to generation [...].²⁵

Unwin again relied on the narrative of sexual repression to liberation as a feature of British sexual culture, citing the legal limits on the ability to publish *anything* on sex before the interwar period as a challenge he had faced. Certainly, whilst England lacked clear literary censorship structures in the early part of the century, the state was able to intervene in and ban publications in a variety of ways through invoking the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 and other legal tools.²⁶ As Unwin 'disliked all forms of censorship on principle', his attitude towards the profoundly important role of books as challenging and pushing the limits of cultural and legal respectability illustrates further why A&U's relationship to sexual advice books was built and sustained.²⁷

The Unwin family's recollections of the events around Stopes's best-seller and *A Young Girl's Diary* cannot be deemed inaccurate—as Feather has noted, Stanley's autobiography is an 'invaluable' insight the publishing industry, and the story repeated in Philip's and Rayner's

²⁴ Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, pp.171-172.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.173.

²⁶ Espley, 'Alec Craig', p.135.

²⁷ Unwin, *Remembrancer*, p.31.

memoirs maps onto this too.²⁸ However, the telling and retelling of these events shows how the Unwin family self-consciously sought to cement their triumphant role in the narrative of a proliferating and changing sexual culture in their memoirs. As McDonald has noted in his adjustment of the ‘communications circuit’, publishers competed for prestige, and the Unwin family’s use of Stopes’s *Married Love* is a telling example of how, through the medium of the memoir, stories of involvement with high-profile books could be used to bolster professional image. Feather’s observation that Stanley’s memoirs are ‘biased’ and fail to achieve their insinuations of revealing the ‘truth’ about the publishing industry falls short of recognising the role of memoirs in the curation of cultural relevance in this context.²⁹ With *Married Love* becoming a best-seller and Stopes a household name in the interwar period, the prestige the Unwin family believed they would gain through maintaining the connection to her work in their writing is evidence of the importance of sexual, marital, and contraceptive advice literature to publishers as a genre that allowed them to connect with and operate within increasingly emergent public discourses about sex and sexuality.

Contradictions and Commercial Motivations

Despite this, Stanley Unwin’s concerns around the legality of publishing a book that dealt with homosexuality and the risk of censorship with Allatini’s *Despised and Rejected* reveals the commercially driven nature of editorial decision-making and culturally contingent nature of publishing on sex that shaped the firm’s involvement with advice literature. Unwin had told his co-director Reynolds ‘that marriage was a legitimate and normal thing, whereas homosexuality

²⁸ John Feather, *A History of British Publishing* (London, 2006), p.166.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

was illegal and a perversion’—hence he wanted A&U to publish *Married Love* and not *Despised and Rejected*, which included reference to homosexuality.³⁰ He was correct about the risk of prosecution from the novel. C.W. Daniel, who subsequently published it, was tried and fined, but reporting in *The Times* foregrounded the novel’s pacifism as the main reason for scrutiny.³¹

It is significant that this book was suppressed because of pacifism in 1918 in England, as this was a notable moment at which concerns around treason and insufficient patriotism were mapped onto different forms of sexual and gender transgression during the First World War. For instance, as Phillip Hoare has argued in relation to the ‘Black Book’ libel trial in 1918, homosexual identities were tied inextricably to notions of decadence, cultural decline, and a threat to hierarchical society. This rendered the First World War pivotal for the formation of notions of morality with the mapping of details of private sexual lives and identities onto perceived dangerous political and cultural shifts that could further disrupt national character and strength in the already tumultuous wartime context.³² Unwin’s decision to avoid involvement with this novel was thus likely a conscious choice reflecting this cultural milieu.

Unwin’s justification to Reynolds for his publishing decisions with *Married Love* and *Despised & Rejected* appear somewhat contradictory in the context of his purported politics, however. His nonconformist upbringing and frustration with ‘society’s ostracism of those who held views, with which he often had personal sympathy’ was held up as a reason for his willingness

³⁰ Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, p.138.

³¹ Ibid; “‘Despised and Rejected’: Publisher of a pacifist novel fined’, *The Times* (11 October 1918).

³² Philip Hoare, *Wilde’s Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy & the First World War* (London, 1997), pp.1-4.

to challenge establishment views and support increasingly radical causes into the 1920s and 1930s on principle, even if his personal beliefs were not so extreme.³³ Whilst Rayner claimed that his father was not especially financially focused with his business, it is apparent that the amount of financial and legal risk he was willing to take would only go so far, and matters of commercial convenience and potential risks of culturally inflammatory public scrutiny could take precedence over personal politics.³⁴

The publishers' contextually dependent willingness to push cultural boundaries thus did not appear to extend to what Stanley Unwin deemed abnormal, legally risky discussions of sex and sexuality, somewhat ironically especially considering part of the motivation for Unwin to start his own firm was frustrations with his uncle T. Fisher Unwin's conservatism. His uncle's company had taken on socialist philosopher and early sexual reformer Edward Carpenter's work, but subsequently dropped the author because he was 'alarmed by Carpenter's writings on the relations of the sexes—it was the time of the Oscar Wilde troubles'.³⁵ Stanley, having later bought Swann Sonnenschein who published some of Carpenter's works in part as a reaction to his experiences of his uncle's firm, reflected on the inheritance of this author as a 'pleasure'. His 'battle' with Scotland Yard defending Carpenter's book on the sexual liberation signalled by the rise in homosexuality, *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), in the early years of the firm was another anecdote Unwin keenly included in his memoirs.³⁶ Defending A&U's reprint of this book, Unwin created a paradoxical image of his personal views on homosexuality and

³³ Unwin, *Remembrancer*, p.61.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp.25-29.

³⁵ Mumby and Stallybrass, *From Swann Sonnenschein*, pp.45-47. On Edward Carpenter's writing on sex, see Sheila Rowbotham, 'In Search of Carpenter', *History Workshop*, 177:3 (Spring 1977), pp.121-133.

³⁶ Unwin, *Truth About Publishing*, pp.323-326; Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, pp.148-149.

publishing activities when placed alongside his claims about the loss of *Married Love* and the personal context in which he was working.

Unwin's recollections about the publication of *A Young Girl's Diary* buttress the idea that publishing on sex—and consequently his support for particular texts—was contingent on the boundaries of respectability politics. He wrote that 'Dirt for dirt's sake' was a 'workable definition of obscenity', thus the intended impacts and audience of a book on sex defined its stability in the book market:

The intention of the writer, and the effect of the work *as a whole*, not upon a child, but 'on a person with average sex instincts' [...] must be considered in any test of obscenity. People who want to bring children into the test overlook the fact that normal children are uninterested in, and incapable of understanding things far beyond their own experience which in a book may sexually excite an adult. Children left unrestricted access to a library of sexology would remain uncorrupted unless elementary information had been wrongly withheld from them and they had been led to believe that there was something mysterious about sex which adults were hiding from them.³⁷

He saw publications on sex as needing a defined purpose and role to avoid being obscene or corrupting, with sex needing to be treated as something ordinary and not 'mysterious' in order to reduce its corrupting potential. Unwin was not alone in his view of *A Young Girl's Diary* or the morality of circulating sexual knowledges more broadly. During the publishing scandal that surrounded the diary, testimonies from the book's translator Eden Paul and high-profile figures

³⁷ Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, pp.173-174.

in British psychoanalysis spoke to the value and importance of the book.³⁸ In a review of the book in *The Lancet* (which Unwin cited in his memoir too), the author questioned why sexological books should only be circulated to educational, medical, and legal professions as A&U's note in their edition stipulated: 'THERE has recently been a change of attitude towards the discussion of sex matters [...]. It is not easy to understand why parents belonging to trades and other professions should not read it.'³⁹ Perhaps Unwin was simply parroting parts of this review in his own words as the language and justifications made are very similar, however, further supports the claim that A&U's involvement with publishing sexual knowledges was contingent on the boundaries of respectability politics and ensuring such books were legally sound and thus commercially viable.

In retelling the story of *Despised and Rejected* and explaining the importance of circulating respectable knowledges in the context of *A Young Girl's Diary* then, perhaps Unwin sought to justify why *Married Love* had not been under his imprint, a reputationally convenient narrative that allowed the firm to be associated with major cultural changes. Perhaps, as well, his defence of *The Intermediate Sex* and *A Young Girl's Diary* was evidence of his claim that should a publisher be 'satisfied that what [they] are doing is right and fully justified' there should be no reason for challenging censorship, and *Despised and Rejected* did not fit these parameters as these books did.⁴⁰ Although the reasons for the described contradictions can only be speculated, they illustrate how the boundaries of respectability politics and commercial sensitivities defined

³⁸ Daniel Gunn and Patrick Guyomard, (eds), *A Young Girl's Diary: A New Edition* (London, 1990), pp.viii-ix.

³⁹ 'Review and Notices of Books: Sexuology', *The Lancet*, 198:5116 (17 September 1921), p.609. Emphasis original.

⁴⁰ Unwin, *Truth About Publishing*, p.323.

what was and was not acceptable to publish and profoundly shaped the publication of advice literature in the period before the First World War.

Looking underneath the obvious desire to build and maintain a reputation as a forward-thinking publisher at the helm of cultural change, the ways in which censorial, legal, and commercial concerns mediated and interacted with personal and political motivations to publish on sex are apparent in this early period. The notion of maintaining legitimacy and respectability continued to guide the firm's wider editorial decisions. Commenting on Philip Unwin's selection of popular sexual and psychology self-help books, Rayner Unwin remarked that he 'published with some flair in this area, avoiding the obvious charlatans and concentrating on practical self-help.'⁴¹ Thus the family continued to mould its image as purveyors of legitimate sexual knowledge from authoritative figures in the shadow of Stanley Unwin's rejection of *Married Love*.

A&U's relationship to the world of sexual, marital, and contraceptive advice literature is therefore demonstrable as growing out of complex decision-making in the early years of the firm. Combining the personal, political, and the commercial, the company positioned itself in relation to advice literature as a symbol of major cultural change in the realm of sex. This illustrates both the importance of memoirs as a self-serving space to manage publisher reputations and the specific desire of Stanley Unwin to craft his legacy in the publishing world. In doing so, this highlights how decentring the 'sex expert' in the history of advice literature opens up possibilities for understanding the contingencies and conditions of the interwar years in particular that moulded and made possible the production of popular sexual knowledges in

⁴¹ Unwin, *Remembrancer*, p.61.

this genre across the twentieth century in Britain. Looking beyond this, I next build a more comprehensive picture of how A&U's relationships with 'sex experts' evolved from the 1920s into the post-war period to further exemplify the underacknowledged yet significant role of publishing networks and publishers in the production and circulation of popular sexual knowledges.

Introducing Dr Norman Haire

In the context of events surrounding *Married Love*, *Despised and Rejected*, and *A Young Girl's Diary*, A&U began to form relationships with 'sex experts' that continued to define their publishing on sex through the 1920s into the 1950s. Whilst these relationships were not always straightforward, they were instrumental to the creation of popular advice books in this period, illustrating the importance of publishing networks in the production and circulation of sexual knowledges. Dr Norman Haire, an Australian medical practitioner who had moved to London in 1919 to further establish his career as a sexologist, was one of such early contacts for A&U. He introduced himself by letter to Stanley Unwin in 1922: 'I should be glad if you could give me an interview. I enclose a card of introduction from Dr. Eden Paul. I want to find a publisher for a book I am writing and Eden Paul thinks it might possibly interest you.'⁴² Here, he drew on his connection with Dr Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (née Gertrude Mary Davenport) to gain Unwin's attention. The couple had met Stanley Unwin in August 1914, some of the first visitors to the office of his new firm when it opened. A socialist and physician, Eden Paul was 'penniless

⁴² AUC 3/2, letter from Norman Haire to Stanley Unwin (22 April 1922); Diana Wyndham, *Norman Haire and the Study of Sex* (Sydney, 2012), p.94.

and starving' following his escape from France in the First World War, and 'it was the start of a lifetime's friendship' with him. They translated many books for A&U thereafter.⁴³

Eden and Cedar Paul had taken an interest in sex reform for some time prior to working with Haire, demonstrating a long-standing interest in sexual knowledge, and contextualising the start of the relationship that the 'sex expert' would build with others in the publishing industry. Having translated *A Young Girl's Diary* for A&U, the couple had an established interest in making psychology and related disciplines accessible as a component of working-class education. For example, they joined a Marxist organisation called the Plebs League in the 1920s whose purpose was to do exactly that.⁴⁴ They also produced some of their own collections on sex-related topics.⁴⁵ Additionally Roy Porter and Lesley Hall cite Eden Paul's involvement in 'sexual reform circles' in relation to his preparedness to defend Iwan Bloch's *The Sexual Life Of Our Time* (1908), a book condemned to be destroyed at Bow Street police court in 1909, which Eden Paul had translated from German.⁴⁶ Thus the couple had interests in common with Haire, especially Eden, who became an important collaborator for the sexologist within and beyond the context of his relationship with A&U. Interestingly, Unwin specified that his lifelong friendship was with Eden, making little mention of Cedar Paul, despite her working

⁴³ Unwin, *The Truth About Publishing*, p.142.

⁴⁴ See Andy Miles, 'Workers' Education: The Communist Party and the Plebs League in the 1920s', *History Workshop*, 18 (1984), p. 105.

⁴⁵ For example, Eden Paul and Cedar Paul, (eds), *Population and Birth-Control: A Symposium* (New York, 1917).

⁴⁶ Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven, 1995), p.165; Iwan Bloch, *The Sexual Life Of Our Time In Its Relations To Modern Civilization*, trans. Eden Paul (London, 1908). Porter and Hall state that Bloch's book was condemned at Bow Street in 'early 1907', however, newspaper reports show that this happened in January 1909: "'Science Books" Condemned', *Holborn and Finsbury Guardian* (8 January 1909), p.8.

with her husband on many translations for the firm.⁴⁷ As Stevenson has recognised, women's work in the publishing industry was often completely overshadowed, and it appears Cedar Paul's contributions to the translation of sexual knowledges is no exception.⁴⁸

Together, Eden Paul and Haire worked on multiple books published on sex across the 1920s and 1930s under different publishers. For instance, they published interventions on 'rejuvenation' operations—vasectomies to increase sexual potency—spurred by a paper given to the BSSSP by Eden Paul in 1921.⁴⁹ Haire went on to produce his own publication following the performance of twenty-five 'rejuvenation' operations titled *Rejuvenation: The Work of Steinach, Voronoff, and Others* (1924), which he claimed he would not have written had he not heard Eden Paul's BSSSP paper on the subject.⁵⁰ They continued to collaborate on introductions and translations for advice literature towards the end of the decade and into the 1930s.⁵¹ Haire's book *Hymen: or the future of marriage* (1927) was published by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., an imprint of Routledge & Kegan Paul formed in 1912, which was founded by Eden

⁴⁷ Unwin, *The Truth About Publishing*, p.142.

⁴⁸ Stevenson, *Book Makers*, pp. xvi-xvii.

⁴⁹ Eden Paul and Norman Haire, *Rejuvenation: Steinach's researches on the sex-glands* (London, 1923); Diana Wyndham, 'Verse-making and Lovemaking—W.B. Yeats' "Strange Second Puberty": Norman Haire and the Steinach Rejuvenation Operation', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 39:1 (2003), p.31. For the first comprehensive history of vasectomy in Britain, see Georgia Grainger, "Objectionable, mean and demeaning": The Popularisation of Vasectomy in Britain, c. 1920-1990', PhD thesis, University of Strathclyde, 2023.

⁵⁰ Norman Haire, *Rejuvenation: The Work of Steinach, Voronoff, and Others* (London, 1924), p.10; Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, pp.107, 117.

⁵¹ Collaborations included Bernhard A. Bauer's *Woman and Love* (New York, 1927): Library of Congress Copyright Office, *Catalogue of Copyright Entries: Part 1: Books, Group 1 New Series, Volume 24, For the year 1927, Nos. 1-148* (Washington, 1928), p.1624. They also worked together on René Guyon, *Sexual Freedom, translated from French by Eden and Cedar Paul with an introduction by Norman Haire* (London, 1939) as part of the International Library of Sociology and Sexology series started by The Bodley Head circa 1929, of which Haire was editor: Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, pp.219, 223-224.

Paul's father (although he had died in 1902).⁵² Moreover, beyond publishing activities, Haire and Eden Paul moved in the same professional circles, connecting themselves with the most prominent sexologists, psychologists, and sex reformers of the day, as illustrated by their attendance at the 1929 London World League for Sexual Reforms Congress, organised by Haire and socialist reformer Dora Russell.⁵³ Haire's relationship with Eden and Cedar Paul was thus important in the publication of sexual knowledge, producing multiple books over the 1920s and 1930s on related topics, and laying the foundations of the networks that then connected Haire to A&U and resulted in a long-term publishing relationship.

Haire, Publishing Networks and the Production of Advice Literature

Such networks and interactions were essential to the production of marketable advice books, visible in advertising efforts for *Birth Control Methods* (1936), Haire's most prominent book published with A&U.⁵⁴ Taking his publicity campaign seriously, Haire sent over thirty copies of his book post-publication to a list of notable medical journals, national and international newspapers in Britain and abroad, religious and social reform publications, and individuals including prominent figures in the eugenics movement, medical profession, and birth control activism. Fifty advertisements of *Birth Control Methods* were also sent to John Lane (The

⁵² Norman Haire, *Hymen or The Future of Marriage* (London, 1927); Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, p.142. On *Hymen*, see Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, p.141.

⁵³ Ivan Crozier, "'All the World's a Stage': Dora Russell, Norman Haire, and the 1929 London World League for Sexual Reform Congress", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 12:1 (2003), pp.17, 27-28, 31; Ivan Crozier, 'Becoming a Sexologist: Norman Haire, the 1929 London World League for Sexual Reform Congress, and Organizing Medical Knowledge about Sex in Interwar England', *History of Science*, 39:3 (2001), pp.299-329; Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, pp.169-192.

⁵⁴ Norman Haire, *Birth Control Methods: Contraception, Abortion, Sterilization* (London, 1936).

Bodley Head after 1936) to be circulated through their International Library of Sexology collection.⁵⁵

However, difficulties with publicising *Birth Control Methods* illustrate that it was not enough to simply have connections, but they had to be significant enough to legitimise the publication. During the publicity process, A&U's editor Charles Furth had encountered trouble publicising *Birth Control Methods* because of a lack of 'really important favourable opinions for them to quote' and the fact that there were not yet any reviews in impactful medical papers like the *BMJ* and *The Lancet*.⁵⁶ A&U saw this as 'unfortunate because this is one of the spheres in which one is least able to intervene without a real danger of making matters worse.'⁵⁷ To bolster its reputation and secure authority to publish in this field, Haire therefore supplied a letter from established physician and sexologist Havelock Ellis—a colleague and mentor—endorsing it.⁵⁸ Ellis by this point was one of the foremost contributors to twentieth-century theorising of sexuality and sexual behaviours.⁵⁹ As his biographer Diana Wyndham documented, Haire had reached out to Ellis for advice on becoming a sexologist following his move to London in 1919, with a friendship and professional relationship evolving after.⁶⁰

A&U and Haire both referred to Stopes's success when producing their publications together to shape and legitimise them. With the Unwin firm's history with Stopes, and *Married Love*

⁵⁵ AUC 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (12 June 1936); letter from Norman Haire to Charles Furth (5 May 1936).

⁵⁶ AUC 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (7 October 1936). For a brief comment on Charles Furth's role at the firm, see Unwin, *Remembrancer*, p.xi.

⁵⁷ AUC 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (7 October 1936).

⁵⁸ AUC 48/11, letter from Norman Haire to Charles Furth (17 October 1936).

⁵⁹ Paul A. Robinson, 'Havelock Ellis and Modern Sexual Theory', *Salmagundi*, 21 (1973), p.29.

⁶⁰ Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, pp.68-70.

being a best-seller during the interwar period, it is no surprise that publishers and ‘sex experts’ alike saw her advice literature as a model and guide for their publications on sex across the twentieth century. *Married Love* had attained ‘tremendous commercial success’ with over two thousand relatively expensive five-shilling hardback copies sold in the first two weeks, and over seventeen thousand copies sold in the first year, catapulting Stopes into the public eye with celebrity status.⁶¹ Whilst, as Alexander Geppert has argued, Stopes’s success with her first book was the ‘exception rather than the rule’ in her career, her ‘celebrity status’ endured and her later advice books continued to sell in substantial numbers.⁶²

This success influenced Haire’s vision for *Birth Control Methods* in tangible ways, as illustrated within his correspondence. He asked A&U to pay attention to what his counterpart was doing when he was initiating the aforementioned marketing campaign: ‘I enclose a pamphlet about Marie Stopes’ new book which reached me by post this morning. I thought it might interest you in view of the fact that you are preparing a pamphlet about my book.’⁶³ Moreover, he continued to be attentive to her work when planning a collaboration titled *The Methods and Technique of Prevention of Conception. A Text Book for Medical Practitioners and Students* with Dr Sidonie Fürst, a German physician who specialised in sexual medicine.⁶⁴ A&U acquired a copy of a comparable book by Stopes from Haire to guide the length of the intended publication, setting the word limit at 140,000 words as a result of Stopes’s book being 136,000 words.⁶⁵ Although

⁶¹ Geppert, ‘Divine Sex’, pp.391-392, 395-397.

⁶² Ibid, p.397.

⁶³ AUC 48/11, letter from Norman Haire to Charles Furth (5 June 1936).

⁶⁴ AUC 48/11, letter from Stanley Unwin to Norman Haire (17 March 1936); Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, pp.97-98.

⁶⁵ AUC 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (4 March 1936); AUC 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire, note from Stanley Unwin (4 March 1936); AUC 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (17 March 1936).

the collaboration was never complete, it is clear Stopes's work was being referenced as a model in this context. As Philip Waller has argued, with the best-seller market expanding in the early-twentieth century, publishers were keen to 'persuade, even dictate, what an author should write. [...] authors who had not so far written a best-seller should model theirs on someone who had.'⁶⁶ Emulating earlier and contemporary work from an established household name was therefore understood as a safe way to ensure a successful publication, reducing the risk, and giving authors a template to work from.

This interest in Stopes's approaches to publishing sexual knowledges was likely in part drawn from the interconnectedness of the 'sex expert' community in interwar Britain. Haire and Stopes had worked together at times, for example, with Haire requesting Stopes's help in 1922 to confront political opposition to widespread, unrestricted circulation of birth control literature.⁶⁷ Ivan Crozier's work on the 1929 World League for Sexual Reform Congress in London has shown that most individuals involved in researching sex at this point in Britain (and beyond) knew each other, interacted, and even worked together, even if personalities and ideas regularly clashed.⁶⁸ For those 'sex experts' based in London—such as Stopes and Haire during this period—many existed in geographical proximity to each other too; Harley Street, known as a hub of private medical practice from the nineteenth-century, also became a centre for sex researchers, psychologists, therapists, and experts of other types into the twentieth century.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain, 1870-1918* (Oxford, 2008), pp.668-669.

⁶⁷ Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, p.97-98.

⁶⁸ Crozier, "'All the World's a Stage'", pp.16-37; Crozier, 'Becoming a Sexologist', pp.299-329.

⁶⁹ Philip Temple and Colin Thom, (eds), 'Chapter 12: Harley Street', *Survey of London, Volumes 51 and 52: South-East Marylebone* (London, 2017), pp.1, 12-19.

Haire and A&U's work together stretched from the introductory letter in 1922 until Haire's premature death in 1952.⁷⁰ His wide-reaching publicity campaign for *Birth Control Methods* necessarily took into consideration religious, scientific, political, and cultural authorities, and intended to secure favourable reviews painting the book—and thus the contested issue of contraception and more broadly discussions of sex and bodies—as legitimate and respectable. Through leaning on professional relationships that highlighted the scientific nature of research into and writing on sex, Haire and A&U drew sexual knowledges into a more legitimate space, attempting to make their production into a serious, respectable endeavour within British publishing.

Examining these networks in relation to Haire illustrates established and new relationships between those involved in the production of advice literature instrumental in supporting the process of relaying emerging psychological, scientific, and medical knowledge on sex to a public audience. Correspondence, collaborative work, and the expansion and utilisation of existing networks were key components of the process of publishing advice books. As Rayner Unwin noted, in publishing, ideally 'authors and publishers should always act in partnership.'⁷¹ Amicable and productive connections between publishers and authors were central to output, and in a world where loyalty and deference were keys to success, as Sue Bradley has detailed, the long-term and productive relationships formed were foundational to facilitating book production.⁷² Thus the introduction of Haire to A&U through his connections with Eden and Cedar Paul and the working partnerships he sought to establish during his time publishing with

⁷⁰ On Haire's death, see Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, p.395.

⁷¹ Rayner Unwin, 'Publishing Tolkien', *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, 33, Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference: Keble College, Oxford, 1992 (1995), p.26.

⁷² Sue Bradley, (ed), *The British Book Trade: An Oral History* (London, 2008), p.xi.

the firm are illustrative of the significance of the networks underpinning the production of advice literature in the twentieth century, showing how they could grow from smaller connections to form the basis of an emerging genre of sexual advice books.

Challenges

Relationships between publishers and ‘sex experts’ did not come without challenges, however. This is particularly noticeable in Haire’s exchanges with A&U. Inconsistent expectations and understandings of the market for publications could cause disagreements. Stanley Unwin became frustrated with Haire in 1926, when he complained they were ‘tired of waiting’ for a manuscript on a proposed book, *Manual of Contraceptive Technique*. Amidst these frustrations, other tensions around the advertising and reprinting of *Rejuvenation* arose. Unwin had hoped for a reprint but with the last two hundred copies waiting to be sold, demand had ‘dropped off very considerably’.⁷³ Haire requested ‘additional advertising’, complaining of the expenses of ‘over £50’ that he had personally put towards previous advertising. He was ‘disappointed by the small amount of advertising’ for *Rejuvenation*, worrying that the publisher would similarly fall short with *Manual of Contraceptive Technique*.⁷⁴ Unwin countered this criticism, stating they too ‘cannot have spent very far short of £50’ advertising the book, and that he believed Haire had ‘an exaggerated idea of what can be achieved by the newspaper advertising of books the turnover of which is, at the best, such a small figure.’⁷⁵ It does not appear disagreements like these damaged the relationship beyond repair, as Haire and Unwin continued to work together until his death, but this was evidently not an uncharacteristic, anomalous incident

⁷³ AUC 14/12, letter from Stanley Unwin to Norman Haire (28 September 1926).

⁷⁴ AUC 14/12, letter from Norman Haire to Stanley Unwin (29 September 1926).

⁷⁵ AUC 14/12, letter from Stanley Unwin to Norman Haire (30 September 1926).

either. For example, before Haire's death in September 1952, some of his final correspondence with Allen & Unwin consisted of clashes over royalty payments and advertising for *Birth Control Methods* in which Haire criticised Stanley Unwin's suggestions as 'very strange' and 'unsatisfactory'.⁷⁶

Haire's divisiveness has been foregrounded in many interventions on his work, showing the tensions his character caused could often be disruptive to working relationships. As Crozier has noted, he had a 'clumsiness in relating to people and [his] unsubtle approach' with a 'knack for making personal enemies, which problematized his relations even with fellow doctors.'⁷⁷ Competition and the desire to out-do each other could also prove motivation for interest in the work of other 'sex experts. For instance, in 1922, Haire and Stopes partook in a public spat in *The Lancet* where Stopes claimed her clinic's contraceptives were better than his. Haire recognised Stopes's contributions to the 'popularising' of birth control, but cuttingly criticised her for abandoning science in favour of religious rhetoric.⁷⁸ This was one of several clashes over the 1920s and 1930s between the two experts, although they maintained friendly correspondence too.⁷⁹ However, biographer Wyndham has defended Haire's often disagreeable attitude, writing that Haire's critics 'mistook his ebullience for self-aggrandisement [...]'. Supporters admired his zeal but his detractors hated him for it and tried to undermine his work by spreading lies or disparaging his achievements.⁸⁰ Whilst perhaps overly defensive of Haire, this nevertheless highlights the difficulties he faced in negotiating his professional relationships,

⁷⁶ AUC 548/14, letter from Norman Haire to Stanley Unwin (10 June 1952). See also Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, p.395.

⁷⁷ Crozier, "'All the World's a Stage'", p.17.

⁷⁸ Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, p.99-100.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, pp.210-211.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, pp.18-19.

as well as those others faced when confronted with him. Whilst I have so far focused on the productive and cordial aspects of publisher-author relations, characterisations of Haire necessarily mediate this; personality clashes between strong-minded individuals and mismatched expectations made for tensions that strained important relationships with publishers and other ‘sex experts’, even when they did not completely break them.

Moreover, publishers and authors had to contend with widespread and varying censorship legislation when circulating books abroad, also causing tensions. Censorship in England in the interwar period was a persistent concern, and in the context of a global book trade where the United States of America was seen as an essential market by Unwin, the legal limitations on book circulation were no less persistently problematic abroad too.⁸¹ Early in his relationship with A&U in 1925, Haire was planning to travel to the United States to lecture and requested that copies of his book on vasectomies for sexual vitality, *Rejuvenation*, be made available there during this period: ‘my book should sell well there at that time.’⁸² He simultaneously enquired about whether another book he was producing on contraception might be circulated in the United States as well.⁸³ Unwin vetoed the idea as ‘impossible’: ‘That I am afraid is quite certain, as even doctors are not supposed to know anything about the subject, in the USA.’⁸⁴ Haire persisted, amongst complaints about the perceived lack of advertising for *Rejuvenation*, asking whether he could find himself an American publisher should Unwin not wish to take it up himself.⁸⁵ Unwin reiterated his concerns disparagingly:

⁸¹ Stanley Unwin, ‘English Books Abroad’ in John Hampden, (ed), *The Book World: A New Survey* (London, 1935), pp.163-177.

⁸² AUC 14/12, letter from Norman Haire to Stanley Unwin (9 January 1925). Emphasis original. See also Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, p.126.

⁸³ AUC 14/12, letter from Norman Haire to Stanley Unwin (9 January 1925).

⁸⁴ AUC 14/12, letter from Stanley Unwin to Norman Haire (12 January 1925).

⁸⁵ AUC 14/12, letter from Norman Haire to Stanley Unwin (13 January 1925).

[...] you will find it definitely illegal to circulate the book over there, but I would suggest your consulting Mr. Myers, of the Medical Books Department of The Macmillan Company, and seeing what he has to say.⁸⁶

Contending with censorship in the United States was a persistent theme for Haire, shaping later tensions too around the circulation of *Birth Control Methods* which William Morrow and Company refused to publish there because of the legal implications. Haire did not understand the problem, listing a number of contraception books published by a range of American publishers: 'I cannot understand Morrows being afraid to publish on account of the law. [...] It is possible that the sale might be restricted to medical practitioners in order for the book to be able to pass through the American post.'⁸⁷

Importing advice books to the United States or finding an American publisher willing to take on such books was therefore a huge risk across the 1920s and 1930s for A&U. In this context by the 1930s, raids organised by John Sumner, heading up the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), resulted in the seizure and burning of approximately \$150,000 worth of erotic books and photographs in New York alone, with book burnings of this nature becoming relatively common across the decade, as Jay A. Gertzman has explained.⁸⁸ He has noted that since the NYSSV's Anthony Comstock began a crusade against the distribution of 'erotic literature' that amounted in federal anti-obscenity legislation under the Comstock Act of

⁸⁶ AUC 14/12, letter from Stanley Unwin to Norman Haire (14 January 1925).

⁸⁷ AUC 48/11, letter from Philip Unwin to Norman Haire (19 February 1936); letter from Norman Haire to Philip Unwin (20 February 1936).

⁸⁸ Jay A. Gertzman, *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920-1940* (Philadelphia, 1999), p.135.

1873, the outlawing of publications on sex was powerfully enforced for the best part of half a century.⁸⁹ Whilst Stanley Unwin ‘disliked all forms of censorship on principle’, he was clearly not willing to take unnecessary, known legal risks to reinforce these principles.⁹⁰ In this context, locating a publisher to risk these well-known financial and legal implications was no easy task, highlighting how the circulation of sexual advice books was shaped and mediated by censorship laws during the publication process, and before distribution had even been attempted.

Sometimes, however, A&U did attempt to circulate books to areas with known, strict censorship laws despite the implications, evidenced by letters from censors received by the firm. For instance, in 1955, they received a letter from the *Oifig Chinsireacht Fhoilseachán* (Office of Censorship of Publications) in Dublin prohibiting the sale of a sexual advice book aimed at adolescent boys that they exported to the Republic of Ireland (ROI) for sale in bookshop Hodges Figgis & Co.⁹¹ Philip Unwin replied to the prohibition notice asking for an explanation of the reasons for censorship citing their intention to appeal the decision.⁹² The 1929 Censorship of Publications Act had specifically instituted a ‘permanent ban on any book deemed indecent or obscene’ under Section 6, the reasoning given in this case.⁹³ Whilst Unwin clearly did not see the book as meeting the grounds for censorship, there was evidently a slim possibility of circulating any such book dealing with sex via legal means of import and export in this legislative context. Attempts to distribute advice literature in the three different contexts—

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.1.

⁹⁰ Unwin, *Remembrancer*, p.31.

⁹¹ AUC 690/1, letter from *Oifig Chinsireacht Fhoilseachán* (Office of Censorship of Publications) to George Allen & Unwin (7 January 1955).

⁹² AUC 690/1, letter from Philip Unwin to *Oifig Chinsireacht Fhoilseachán* (Office of Censorship of Publications) (12 January 1955).

⁹³ Mark O’Brien, ‘Policing the press: censorship, family planning, and the press in Ireland, 1929-67’, *Irish Studies Review*, 29:1 (2021), p.17.

Ireland, the United States, and England as discussed earlier in this chapter—highlight how networks formed with ‘sex experts’ forced publishers to confront the realities and practicalities of censorship legislation, which could often present challenges for them, especially when navigating already tense relationships with ‘sex experts’ like Haire.

Returning to A&U’s relationship with Haire then, despite these issues, A&U’s support of the author and the endurance of professional relationships was especially important given the context he was operating in. Not only were cultural taboos surrounding sex and birth control and the subsequent legal challenges encountered a problem, but Haire’s personal identity had potential to put him in a difficult position when publishing on sex too. Haire has often been positioned as an outsider within the British medical establishment of interwar London, facing a long battle to be regarded as a ‘respectable English doctor’, because of his position as ‘a Jew, a homosexual, and an Australian’, as Rusterholz has detailed.⁹⁴ Antisemitism was extremely visible in Britain at this time, with organisations such as the British Union of Fascists (BUF) capitalising on anti-war feeling through their involvement in pacifist protesting to grow antisemitic sentiments amongst the public, as Julie Gottlieb has argued.⁹⁵ Although we must not diminish the significance and impact of this on Jewish communities in Britain, it is important to note the failure of Britain’s fascist movement in this period despite it gaining sympathy within the mainstream, suggesting that fascism and antisemitism were not entirely ubiquitous.⁹⁶ Despite this, even some who had productive relationships with Haire held

⁹⁴ Caroline Rusterholz, ‘Testing the Gräfenberg Ring in Interwar Britain: Norman Haire, Helena Wright, and the Debate over Statistical Evidence, Side Effects, and Intra-uterine Contraception’, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 72:4 (2017), p.452.

⁹⁵ Julie Gottlieb, ‘Gender and the “Jews’ War”’: Women, Anti-Semitism, and Anti-War Campaigns in Britain, 1938-1940’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 31:4 (2020), p.749.

⁹⁶ Janet Dack, ‘Conduct Unbecoming? Attitudes towards Jews in the British Fascist and Mainstream Tory Press, 1925-39’, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, 15:1-

antisemitic views—for example, Havelock Ellis criticised Haire for ‘objectionable’ qualities he attributed to his being Jewish.⁹⁷

Intersecting with this, Haire’s sexuality could have presented difficulties, as Wyndham has noted.⁹⁸ Although not a dominant attitude at this time, homosexuality was increasingly criminalized, pathologized, and rendered deviant, as shown by the work of historians such as Deborah Cohen, Matt Houlbrook, and Jonathan Ned Katz, who illustrate the ways in which sexual behaviours and identities were reified through negative identifications against establishing norms of heterosexuality.⁹⁹ However, Haire’s sexuality was little-known in the 1930s, and for a professional who was wealthy, ostensibly respectable, and discreet, the fact of his sexuality would have been less outwardly problematic than for other less socially and financially established men at this point.¹⁰⁰ As Houlbrook has argued, class hugely shaped how men experienced their sexuality, and although the boundaries around acceptable sexual behaviour were being made more concrete by the 1940s, there were opportunities for men from different class backgrounds to engage in relationships with other men in ways that slipped beneath public scrutiny.¹⁰¹ Regardless, it is important to acknowledge that Haire’s different

2 (2009), pp.101-123; Daniel Tilles, ‘British Interwar Fascism and Antifascism’ in Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce, (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust* (Basingstoke, 2020), pp.37-56.

⁹⁷ Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, pp.71, 112.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, pp.129-130.

⁹⁹ Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: The Things We Tried to Hide* (London, 2013), pp.141-145; Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago, 2005), pp.19-21; Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, first published 1995 (Chicago, 2007), pp.47-55, 83-112.

¹⁰⁰ Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, pp.129-130.

¹⁰¹ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp.171, 270. See also Helen Smith, *Masculinity, Class and Same-Sex Desire in Industrial England, 1895-1957* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp.4-10.

identities in this context did nevertheless position him as somewhat of an outsider in interwar London, making his involvement in medical and scientific circles subject to more scrutiny.

Haire's success at forging a career in Britain has therefore been seen as surprising by some, including Porter and Hall, who argued that the aforementioned identities 'must have militated against him in medical circles', despite his successful gynaecological and sexual medicine practice on Harley Street.¹⁰² Moreover, the reasons for Haire's success have been explored in recent work by Caroline Rusterholz. She has suggested that his recognition for bringing an early intrauterine device (IUD)—the 'Gräfenberg Ring'—into use in Britain was made possible because of Dr Helena Wright's work testing it as a 'respectable married woman doctor' with connections inside the medical establishment.¹⁰³ Additionally, Wyndham has suggested that Haire's persistent personality and the mass-advertising of his books were likely influential in overcoming hostilities and limitations to his career.¹⁰⁴ These interventions show that Haire's position to produce popular sexual knowledges was thus hard won, with some acknowledgement of the networks around him that buttressed his work.

Although this work is suggestive of the importance of the networks surrounding Haire in his contributions to the birth control movement and advice literature, the extent to which A&U as his publisher facilitated and grew his success has not been fully recognised. This is despite Wyndham and Rusterholz's interventions, the former of which uses the A&U collection substantially. Mapping the ways in which Haire's relationships evolved with and through A&U therefore reveals the negotiations, suggestions, and support the firm provided that helped him

¹⁰² Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p.282.

¹⁰³ Rusterholz, 'Testing the Gräfenberg Ring', pp.450-451.

¹⁰⁴ Wyndham, *Norman Haire*, pp.129-130.

navigate the sometimes-tenuous circumstances he faced in publishing on sex. In doing so, it illustrates the significance of publisher-author relationships and wider intellectual networks in producing advice literature in the interwar years, something the emphasis on the individual sex expert in this context has somewhat obscured.

Dr Eustace Chesser and the Society for Sex Education and Guidance

By the close of the 1940s, then, Stanley Unwin's interest in publishing advice literature and the broader circulation of sexual knowledge was solidified; through his political, personal, and commercial motivations as illustrated in the cases of *Married Love* and *A Young Girl's Diary*, and the relationship formed with Haire, A&U was firmly involved in the production of popular sexual knowledges. Into the immediate post-war period, Unwin and the publishing house formed a new relationship with Scottish psychiatrist Dr Eustace Chesser. He had published his first book on sex, *Love Without Fear*, in 1940, the same year he began a practice in London at 92 Harley Street, where he saw patients well into the 1960s.¹⁰⁵ As Lesley Hall has noted, Chesser was a prolific writer and commentator on issues relating to sex, bodies, and birth control, amassing countless press articles and radio and television broadcasts over the course of his career. As an advocate of 'sexually progressive causes' from abortion to homosexuality, he rose to prominence in the post-war period.¹⁰⁶ Chesser formed a relationship first with Stanley

¹⁰⁵ Eustace Chesser, *Love Without Fear: A Plain Guide to Sex Technique for Every Married Adult* (London, 1940); Lesley Hall, 'Chesser, Eustace [formerly Isaac Chesarkie]', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). Available at: <https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-40923?rskey=mSKvLC&result=1> (Accessed: 4 November 2022). See also John Cooper, *Pride Versus Prejudice: Jewish Doctors and Lawyers in England, 1890-1990* (Liverpool, 2003), p.70; Temple and Thom, 'Chapter 12: Harley Street', p.15.

¹⁰⁶ Hall, 'Eustace Chesser'.

Unwin and then with his nephew, Philip, that was close and enduring. In the early days, this orbited around his involvement in the SSEG, and later, his extensive writing of reader's reports for the firm, which will be engaged with in Chapter Two of this thesis.

At the start of 1949, Chesser was communicating with Stanley Unwin as Secretary of the SSEG, during which period the Society was sent a number of books on sex for review and endorsement.¹⁰⁷ The SSEG was founded in 1943, with its three key aims by 1946 being: the promotion of 'sound sex education', advocating for 'conditions favourable to happy marriage and family life', and supporting legislation aligned with these purposes. Its high-profile patrons included Vera Brittain, Julian Huxley, and Stella Browne, and it was chaired by Zoë Dawe, a children's sex educator whom Chesser also collaborated with on a 1945 book on practicing sex education.¹⁰⁸ It had a reference library at 55 Upper Brook Street, London, presided over by author Alec Craig as Librarian, and provided public lectures and guidance via correspondence with enquirers. With Chesser writing as Secretary from his Harley Street practice, by the late-1940s, the Society was physically at centre of London's private medical care and burgeoning sexual health practices in the post-war period.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ AUC 425/8, letter from Eustace Chesser to Allen & Unwin (1 February 1949); letter from Allen & Unwin to Eustace Chesser (4 May 1949); letter from Eustace Chesser's secretary to Allen & Unwin (10 May 1949); letter from Allen & Unwin to The Society for Sex Education and Guidance (SSEG) (16 June 1949); letter from Allen & Unwin to Eustace Chesser (7 July 1949).

¹⁰⁸ Wellcome Collection (henceforth: Wellcome), Family Planning Association (henceforth: SA/FPA), SA/FPA/A13/86, SSEG pamphlet (undated), pp.5, 7; Eustace Chesser and Zoë Dawe, *The Practice of Sex Education* (London, 1945). On Zoë Dawe's work as a children's sex educator, see Zoë Dawe, 'Sex Education in Practice', *Health Education Journal*, 2:1 (1944), pp.19-24.

¹⁰⁹ SA/FPA/A13/86, SSEG pamphlet (undated), pp.3, 9-10; Temple and Thom, 'Chapter 12: Harley Street', pp.12-14.

Forming another branch of the extensive connections and networks built by Britain's sex reformers and experts, Chesser's correspondence on behalf of the Society drew the Unwin family closer to the sex reform movement. In September 1949, discussions developed between Philip and Chesser of a list of books on sex the SSEG was compiling for the National Book League (NBL). Interestingly, the League was founded in 1925 by Stanley Unwin as an educational initiative to generate publicity for books, of which book lists were part.¹¹⁰ Writing back to a request to endorse *Sex in Social Life* (1949) by Sybil Neville-Rolfe, Chesser recommended the book for 'educationalists, marriage guidance councillors and social workers', stating they had included it in their NBL bibliography, and asked if they could retain the copy A&U had sent them for their library.¹¹¹ Following this, a list of books published by the firm intended for the bibliography was sent to Philip for review; some he marked as out of print, and he responded, as requested, with prices, page numbers, and blurbs for the rest of the volumes.¹¹² Into the 1950s, the SSEG began producing its own list of books on sex, which again, Philip Unwin assisted with. Enclosing this bibliography, Chesser wrote to Philip asking him to send A&U publications for review that would be suitable additions; Philip praised the Society's efforts, which he found 'remarkably comprehensive', being 'delighted' to see forty of A&U's publications dated back over twenty years included.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Clifford Simmons, 'The National Book League', *Elementary English*, 48:2 (1971), pp. 210, 211. See also Ian Norrie, *Sixty Precarious Years: A short history of the National Book League, 1925-1985* (London, 1985).

¹¹¹ Sybil Neville-Rolfe, *Sex in Social Life* (London, 1949); AUC 425/8, letter from Eustace Chesser to Philip Unwin (6 September 1949).

¹¹² AUC 425/8, letter from B. Rowlson to Allen & Unwin (21 September 1949); letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (30 September 1949); letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (27 October 1949).

¹¹³ AUC 539/15, letter from Eustace Chesser to Philip Unwin (27 June 1952); letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (3 July 1952).

Through this correspondence, Philip's interest in the Society's sex education work and his investment in helping produce the relevant information for their bibliographies is evident. Whilst this was inevitably commercially motivated—after all, the NBL was a publicity organisation, and the more people who knew about A&U's books, the more likely sales were made—Philip Unwin appeared genuinely invested in the Society's cause as well. This was characteristic, considering the purported influence his uncle's rejection of Stopes's *Married Love* had on him, and his focus on curating popular health and medicine books for the firm.¹¹⁴ Moreover, A&U's substantial number of books on sex intended for readers beyond the medical and scientific professions were an ideal fit for the SSEG and the NBL. As Director Dr John Hadfield explained, the book lists the NBL produced were intended as an introductory bibliography to a range of topics 'for the use of the 'man-in-the-street' and not for the student or professional man.'¹¹⁵

Stanley, too, became involved in the efforts of sex education societies in the early-1950s, further highlighting the immediate post-war period as a time when the family and firm's roots in the sex reform movement were extended and reinforced. For instance, he formed a brief connection with The Alliance: A Society for Education in Sex, Marriage and the Family, founded in 1903 as the Alliance of Honour. With Honorary Directors Arthur Herbert Gray and Roger Pilkington, it was a Christian association explicitly focused on male sexual purity.¹¹⁶ Into the twentieth century, as Frank Mort has argued, there was 'a growing consensus that sex hygiene teaching

¹¹⁴ Unwin, *Remembrancer* (Ludlow, 1999), p.61.

¹¹⁵ Wellcome, J.B.S. Haldane Papers, HALDANE/4/26/37, letter from John Hadfield to J.B.S. Haldane (25 September 1945).

¹¹⁶ Lutz Sauerteig and Roger Davidson, (eds), *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in Twentieth Century Europe* (Abingdon, 2009), p. 95; Edward J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin, 1977), pp.125-153.

held out the best assurance for eliminating vice’, organisations such as The Alliance positioned themselves as moral and medical authorities on sex, circumscribing their role in the regulation of respectable sexual behaviours.¹¹⁷ As shown earlier in this chapter, Unwin was a defender of sex education in so-called respectable formats, something his relationship with this organisation further proves.

In 1952, Dr Hadfield (also Director of the NBL) was supposed to give a lecture for the Alliance with Unwin chairing, which was instead given by Dr F.E. England due to Hadfield having the flu.¹¹⁸ A draft of Unwin’s original opening speech for Hadfield’s lecture elucidates further his personal interest in sex reform, or at least the story he told about the origins of this:

I had the rare distinction of having a Victorian mother who had lived in openness and frankness in all matters including sex. Her Victorian contemporaries were many of them dumbfounded when they learnt that she felt that her children (I am the youngest of nine) ought to be fully & properly informed on such matters & preferably by their parents. When her contemporaries protested she just smiled & said—it is all in the bible.¹¹⁹

Unwin acknowledged his mother’s influence on his views of sex education, something that does not appear to have featured in his explanations prior to this, as well as his lifelong friendship with Hadfield (the ‘distinguished lecturer’ who he went to school with) whom he held in high regard. Unwin tentatively continued his relationship with the Alliance, arranging meetings with its members following the lecture, although this appears to have been mostly regarding a

¹¹⁷ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp.287, 302-309.

¹¹⁸ AUC 531/7, letter from Vincent Long to Stanley Unwin (1 January 1952).

¹¹⁹ AUC 531/7, draft of a speech for The Alliance by Stanley Unwin (undated).

memorandum the organisation was submitting to the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce, and interest in a property he managed for their headquarters, which he rejected.¹²⁰ During this, the Alliance wrote that Unwin was ‘good enough to display interest in our work even though you felt yourself unable to take an active part in promoting it.’¹²¹ Although there is no record of why Unwin felt this way, this is telling of the line the publisher trod when involving himself in sex reform efforts; he was careful to manage his image and associations in ways that served him and his business.

Working through this correspondence, the mesh of relationships that are layered together in the world of publishing and circulating sexual knowledges is striking. Most obviously, the societies mentioned were founded and maintained by well-known ‘sex experts’. Yet it is equally clear that the Unwin’s curated a role in a number of these efforts at the highest levels, from Stanley’s organising around book publicity to his speaking at society events formed around the work of sex experts he had been connected with for many years, and Philip’s encouragement of Chesser’s work with the SSEG. Whilst they were not necessarily the sole or biggest driving force behind these organisations, their interest in maintaining connections and assisting them through their publishing of sex advice books highlights the importance of A&U’s work in the circulation of sexual knowledges. This aspect of their publishing careers has gone largely unexplored in the present scholarship, however. Ultimately, this correspondence informs our understanding of the family’s personal and professional connection to the cause and offers more detail to their motivations for publishing advice literature across the century.

¹²⁰ AUC 531/7, letter from Vincent Long to Stanley Unwin (29 January 1952); letter from Stanley Unwin to Vincent Long (1 February 1952); letter from Vincent Long to Stanley Unwin (4 February 1952); letter from A. Havelock to Stanley Unwin (14 July 1952); letter from Stanley Unwin to A. Havelock (17 July 1952).

¹²¹ AUC 531/7, letter from A. Havelock to Stanley Unwin (14 July 1952).

‘My Dear Chesser’: Friendship and Publishing Sex Advice

Although Chesser had instigated his relationship with A&U through correspondence with Stanley Unwin, his main point of contact throughout the 1950s was Philip; their correspondence highlights the importance of this lesser-acknowledged historical actor in the sustaining of relationships with ‘sex experts’ in the post-war period. Philip and Chesser’s relationship was both professional and advisory, and personal, the latter of which I focus on in this section. As Ryder noted of the A&U archive: ‘What is to be found in the [...] catalogue entries, as testimony to their one-shot munificence? Or perhaps I should say ‘Who is to be found?’, for the dominant thread running through it all is, of course, provided by Stanley Unwin.’¹²² Philip’s correspondence with Chesser offers a mediation of Stanley’s voice, emphasising the polyvocal nature of the publishing process.

Philip and Chesser’s correspondence is illustrative of the publishers’ more social, personable role in forming and maintaining relationships with sex experts, something Stanley was less adept at. The informal tone of Philip Unwin’s correspondence with Chesser grew from 1951, when the pair regularly attended lunches together and Philip addressed the author as ‘My Dear Chesser’.¹²³ They interacted in overlapping social circles by 1955: ‘Thank you again for a most enjoyable party where I was particularly glad of the opportunity for a long talk with Joan

¹²² Ryder, ‘Allen & Unwin’, p.72.

¹²³ AUC 494/9, letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (30 August 1951); AUC 494/9, letter from Eustace Chesser to Philip Unwin (31 August 1951); AUC 539/15, letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (25 June 1952); AUC 628/7 letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (3 February 1954); letter from Eustace Chesser to Philip Unwin (15 February 1954); letter from Eustace Chesser to Philip Unwin (22 April 1954).

Malleson.¹²⁴ Malleson, a British gynaecologist and sex reformer, wrote books on sex for popular audiences under her own name and the pseudonym 'Medica' as well as textbooks for medical professionals.¹²⁵ This correspondence illustrates Unwin's enthusiasm to expand his networks with sex reformers and experts, thus his involvement with Chessser continued to take on a more informal nature, and the attendance of joint social occasions served both professional and personal purposes.

Social occasions such as lunches in the publishing world were one of the main spheres where professional and personal connections were built, authors were signed, and the details and practicalities of publications were discussed, as Bradley's oral history of the book trade has illustrated.¹²⁶ Although we can only grasp fleeting details of these meetings from letters, as shown in the written exchanges between Unwin and Chessser, they were evidently important to the publisher as a mode through which to connect with his authors. Unwin's conduct here appears very different to that of his uncle, as Stanley's aversion to socialising with authors and others is well documented: 'Unwin did not seek to acquire authors by entertaining them [...]. Evidence of Unwin eating with an author to tease out of him the promise of a new book is rarely found [...].'¹²⁷ Towards the middle and end of the twentieth century, there are glimpses of the establishing role others in the firm had in securing and maintaining author relationships. For example, Rayner wrote of Charles Furth's patience working with J.R.R. Tolkien on *The Hobbit*, a book which took many years and endless prompting from the firm's editors to complete: 'It was a business relationship between author and publisher, but increasingly became a trusting

¹²⁴ AUC 669/11, letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chessser (16 March 1955).

¹²⁵ 'Obituary: Joan Malleson, M.B.', *British Medical Journal*, 1:4977 (26 May 1956), p.1242.

¹²⁶ Bradley, *British Book Trade*, pp.156-168.

¹²⁷ Ryder, 'Allen & Unwin', p.73.

friendship as well.’¹²⁸ Although Rayner claimed the relationship with Tolkien was in many ways an anomalously close one, there is evidence in the Chesser correspondence of a similar, if not as extensive, friendship that formed between him and Philip across the 1950s.¹²⁹ Thus whilst Stanley is often credited—both by himself in memoirs and as the focus of much literature on the firm—as the key figure in the building of A&U’s success, it is important to consider the role of others like Philip in developing relationships with prominent authors and reviewers like Chesser who contributed to the production of advice books.

In part, this was because the day-to-day ‘servicing’ of books by many authors was delegated by Stanley to Philip (and Furth), and Philip’s responsibilities increased steadily across this decade, with him controlling around half of the titles issued each year and giving a huge amount of attention to each author he brought to print. Stanley continued to monitor all correspondence and contracts, with only modest initiative by the other editors being allowed.¹³⁰ However, Philip did push back and carve himself a significant role regardless. He ‘took his own decisions; trusted, and was trusted by, long-serving and experienced colleagues, who also in their own fields had authority to act [...]’¹³¹ Despite, therefore, Philip appearing as a background character in Stanley’s memoirs, the archive reveals how foundational his efforts were in building author relationships with the likes of Chesser, and subsequently his prominent role in the production of books about sex for the firm. This places Philip as a key figure in the circulation of sexual knowledge within and through the British publishing industry from the mid-twentieth century.

¹²⁸ Unwin, ‘Publishing Tolkien’, p.26.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Unwin, *Remembrancer*, pp.33, 35, 51, 61.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 61.

However, as with Stanley Unwin and Haire in the decades prior, Philip and Chesser's relationship was not always smooth, and ultimately broke down. Tensions developed in 1954 over a survey the sex expert was conducting on marriage and sexual relationships with the intention of A&U becoming its publisher. Philip was sceptical of its commercial viability, and Chesser felt the need to reassure him that there would 'not be the slightest ill-feeling' on his part should his project be rejected for publication with the firm.¹³² Whilst the pair discussed the project further, Chesser turned down A&U's offer of an £1,500 advance subject to the approval of specimen chapters, to eventually publish the survey with Hutchinson's Medical Publications in 1956 as *The Sexual, Marital and Family Relationships of the English Woman*, also known as 'The Chesser Report'.¹³³ A condensed version was reissued as a 'general interest' book by Jarrolds publishers in 1958 as well.¹³⁴ Although A&U had not seen the commercial prospects of this report, it was clear that other publishers did. Rejections of manuscripts could thus also be generative for publications on sex, suggesting that because publishing relationships could be put under strain, it was important for 'sex experts' to keep their networks broad and facilitate other avenues for the production and circulation of their work.

Whilst more regular communication trailed off around the time of this first incident, Philip coordinated Stanley's support for Chesser's application to the Royal Institution of Great Britain

¹³² AUC 628/7, letter from Eustace Chesser to Philip Unwin (23 August 1954). See also AUC 628/7, sample questionnaire, 'Research Council into Marriage and Human Relationships', Parts A, B and C.

¹³³ AUC 628/7, letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (25 August 1954); letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (22 September 1954); letter from Eustace Chesser to Philip Unwin (23 September 1954); Eustace Chesser, *The Sexual, Marital and Family Relationships of the English Woman* (London, 1956). See also T.H. Hawkins, 'The Chesser Report', *Nature*, 179 (1957), p.337.

¹³⁴ Eustace Chesser, *Women: A Popular Edition of 'The Chesser Report'* (London, 1958).

in 1954 and expressed that it was ‘a pleasure’ to have arranged this.¹³⁵ Despite this, by 1955, their communication largely stopped in the sphere of publications; whether this is a result of discretionary filing by the company, or an absence of letters altogether, is unclear. However, this does correlate with Philip’s rejection of a manuscript that Chesser had proposed to the publisher in August of that year. Philip had to inform him that it was not viable for them owing to its specialised nature: ‘We may be mistaken but we can see no hope of its selling in any quantity to the general reader. Very regretfully then I must admit that we are not sufficiently optimistic to be willing to commit ourselves to publication [...].’¹³⁶ Although Philip attempted to let Chesser down gently, and reassurances that the difficulties over the survey would be forgotten on Chesser’s end, this later incident was perhaps the cause of the breakdown in communication between the publisher and author.

The negotiations and tensions in these examples highlight that the production of advice literature was tricky and required compromise on both sides, something that was not always navigable. A&U’s rejection of Chesser’s survey and later manuscript also serve to remind us that publishers were ultimately gatekeepers of sexual knowledge in this context, something explored in more depth in Chapter Two of this thesis. They frequently decided whether particular ideas about sex, bodies, and desires should be made available in print to the public based on commercial viability and the potential for profit. Sometimes, even when an author had seen previous success and developed a friendly relationship with a publisher, financial reasoning won out, and once productive connections were damaged in the process.

¹³⁵ AUC 628/7 letter from Eustace Chesser to Philip Unwin (17 December 1954); AUC 628/7, letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (20 December 1954).

¹³⁶ AUC 669/11, letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (3 May 1955).

Conclusion

Stanley Unwin expressed that the commercialisation of publishing in the twentieth century shaped assumptions that books were ‘dead, not living things’, leading to ignorance towards ‘the peculiar and indeed parental relationship of the author to his work, the realisation of which is the beginning of wisdom in a publisher.’¹³⁷ Hinting towards the obscured importance of both the publisher and their relationship to the author in his memoir, the tendency to underemphasise the networks and motivations—political, personal, and commercial—at play *behind* ‘sex experts’ has continued in historiography on advice literature, as it has in wider book histories.¹³⁸

This chapter has illustrated the complexity of the publishing and intellectual networks and motivations behind marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice literature through the specialised case study of A&U, with a particular focus on the early years of the firm and the interwar and post-war relationships with key ‘sex experts’ in this context. Whilst acknowledging the significance of *Married Love* within this, the chapter has moved beyond the focus on Stopes as a driving force in the ‘popularisation’ of sexual knowledges to decentre the ‘sex expert’ and map the intricacies of the networks around them. In doing so, I have argued that the commercial, political, and personal interests and motivations of Stanley Unwin—and the lesser-acknowledged Philip Unwin—ultimately drove and shaped the relationships that produced advice books.

¹³⁷ Unwin, *Truth About Publishing*, p.10.

¹³⁸ Nicola Wilson, (ed), *The Book World: Selling and Distributing British Literature, 1900-1940* (Leiden, 2016), p.2.

Throughout this, Stanley Unwin's voice dominates both the archive and the historiographical story of why and how sex advice became part of A&U's publishing output. There is a tendency to privilege men's contributions in publishing and book history, in part a reflection of the relative obscurity of women's roles in the archives. This has been compounded in memoirs, emphasising the ways in which stories about culturally significant moments were told and retold to insert these key male figures and their work into narratives of progressive sexual liberation across the twentieth century. The relationships formed by A&U with 'sex experts' Haire and Chesser—and the connection the latter had with Philip Unwin in particular—however, act as a mediating force in this, emphasising the polyvocal and relational nature of publishing. With the first part of this chapter speaking to the importance of the interwar years in forming A&U's connection with sexual advice, the second part then illustrates how this relationship grew in the post-war period. In doing so, it highlights how these relationships came to define and dominate how and by whom advice literature was produced, what it contained, and where it was found.

Taking the processes of knowledge production seriously and investigating the components of relationships, motivations, and commercial considerations that enabled the creation and circulation of advice books is insightful for reframing our understanding of how sexual cultures were produced and reproduced. It recognises the importance of the publishing world in this process, showing that 'sex experts' and the cultural significance their material and intellectual outputs across the twentieth century cannot be fully understood without placing them into the context of an expanding, commercialised, and polyvocal industry. To do so, this chapter has drawn on advances in book and cultural histories that attempt to theorise books as commercially

and culturally bound within a complicated network of actors, pressures, and influences.¹³⁹ In exploring these themes, this chapter sets the context for the rest of the thesis, which continues to follow the lifecycle of advice literature from production, through circulation, and to reception.

¹³⁹ Darnton, 'What Is the History of Books?', pp.67-69; Adams and Barker, 'A New Model for the Study of the Book', pp.13-14; Feely, 'Karl Marx'; Stevenson, *Book Makers*, p.xv.

CHAPTER TWO

SHAPING SEXUAL ADVICE LITERATURE

‘Well worth a specialist opinion’: Publishers’ Expert Readers and the Production of Sexual Knowledges

In 1952, Evelyn Unwin—Philip Unwin’s wife—reviewed American physician George W. Corner’s book *Attaining Womanhood* (first published in New York in 1939), an introduction to sex and reproduction for young girls, that George Allen & Unwin (A&U) intended to publish for the British market. Deeming it a ‘good little book’ with an ‘untrimmed factual approach’ to sex, Unwin’s critique ended with the suggestion that it was “Well worth a specialist opinion”.¹ The book—along with its companion volume for boys titled *Attaining Manhood*—was subsequently sent to at least three external readers for reviews.² After rounds of suggestions and edits from these readers, A&U produced the companion volumes under their imprint in 1953.³ At A&U, internal and external reader’s reports were used extensively, the former when a member of staff had enough knowledge to give an opinion, and the latter employed when a

¹ University of Reading Special Collections, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Papers, Reader’s Reports (henceforth: AURR) AURR 20/1/75, Evelyn Unwin on *Attaining Womanhood* by George W. Corner (25 March 1952). Emphasis original. George W. Corner, *Attaining Womanhood: A Doctor Talks to Girls About Sex* (New York, 1939). On Corner’s work and life, see Mary S. Calderone, ‘In memoriam George Washington Corner, Sr., MD’, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 18:1 (1982), pp.81-83.

² George W. Corner, *Attaining Manhood: A Doctor Talks to Boys About Sex* (New York, 1938); AURR 20/1/76, Eustace Chesser on *Attaining Womanhood and Attaining Manhood* by George W. Corner (21 April 1952); AURR 20/1/77, P.M. Bradbury on *Attaining Womanhood and Attaining Manhood* by George W. Corner (undated); AURR 20/1/78, Eleanor French on *Attaining Womanhood and Attaining Manhood* by George W. Corner (21 April 1952).

³ George W. Corner, *Attaining Manhood: A Doctor Talks to Boys About Sex* (London, 1953); George W. Corner, *Attaining Womanhood: A Doctor Talks to Girls About Sex* (London, 1953).

manuscript contained information on a ‘special subject’ that required more expertise.⁴ The Unwin family were heavily involved in the internal reviews process, with Evelyn, Stanley’s son David, and his daughter Ruth all reviewing for the firm over its lifetime.⁵ Typically, as Stanley Unwin recorded in his memoir, manuscripts received at A&U were sent to just one external reviewer. However, in ‘doubtful cases’, as with Corner’s books, there may have been ‘as many as three or four written opinions’ before a publication decision was made.⁶

Publishers’ expert readers were one important yet consistently unrecognised component of the complicated production process that moulded and mediated sexual knowledges in popular advice literature. Long before the above example took place, Stanley Unwin had lamented the position of the publishers’ reader in his memoir:

Publishers’ readers seldom, if ever, get the praise they deserve. The public knows little or nothing about their conscientious and exhausting work, and few are the authors who are prepared to recognize publicly the benefits they have derived from their friendly suggestions and criticisms. The number of MSS. [manuscripts] completely recast, or improved out of all knowledge, at a reader’s suggestion is far greater than is commonly supposed. Usually his advice is accepted and acted upon [...].⁷

Drawing attention to the ambiguity of their work to the world beyond the publishing house, Unwin’s comments hint towards the hidden importance of readers in the writing and rewriting

⁴ Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About Publishing*, third edition (London, 1929), p.22.

⁵ Brian Ryder, ‘The George Allen & Unwin Collection: Reading University Library’, *Publishing History*, 47 (2000), p.72.

⁶ Unwin, *Truth About Publishing*, p.22.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 25.

of manuscripts. Ultimately, he suggested, their comments could—and did—fundamentally alter the types and forms of knowledges as they appeared in the final published product.

In scholarship on books and publishing, little has changed with regards to the side-lined position of the publishers' expert reader, resulting in a flattening of the landscape of knowledge production. Although historians such as Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker have broken down and expanded upon early modelling in Robert Darnton's 'communications circuit' to examine how the production process worked, their modelling homogenised the intricacies of the stages prior to book manufacturing and distribution under the umbrella of 'publishing'.⁸ Marking the 'decision to publish' as 'the first step in the creation of a book', they reductively dismiss the writing, reading, and reviewing that takes place prior to the point at which the publisher makes their decision.⁹ More recently, there have been a couple of valuable interventions on readers that have started to restore their place in histories of publishing. Christopher Hilliard has investigated reviews of unsolicited fiction manuscripts to demonstrate how aspiring writers forged their literary approaches in interwar Britain, whilst Andrew Nash has detailed novelist, publisher, and broadcaster Frank Swinnerton's time as a reader for Chatto & Windus between 1909 and 1926, crediting him with transforming the firm's place in the literary scene.¹⁰ These contributions, however, do little to unpack the specifics of *how* internal and external readers and publishers together moulded the contents of books.

⁸ Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker, 'A New Model for the Study of the Book' in Nicolas Barker, (ed), *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society: The Clark Lectures, 1986-1987* (London, 1993), pp.15-18; Robert Darnton, 'What Is the History of Books?', *Daedalus*, 111:3 (1982), pp.67-69.

⁹ Adams and Barker, 'A New Model for the Study of the Book', p.18.

¹⁰ Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), pp.70-97; Andrew Nash, 'A Publisher's Reader on the Verge of Modernity: The Case of Frank Swinnerton', *Book History*, 6 (2003), p.175.

Evelyn Unwin's request for a 'specialist opinion' implicitly denoted the boundaries of sexual expertise, reflecting how the publishing world at this point understood the manufacturing of advice books as an exercise in the translation of 'expert' knowledge for a 'lay' public audience. This oversimplification of how knowledge production worked has been deconstructed recently by historians including Laura Doan, whose challenges to this hierarchical 'popularisation' model of top-down knowledge flow have challenged us to think more holistically about the ways in which ideas were produced, reproduced, and 'ventilated'.¹¹ This chapter's starting point is therefore to ask what we can understand differently about the nature and significance of advice literature if we examine the contours and technicalities of how sexual knowledges were written and rewritten within and through the publishing process. The role that publishers' readers had in this is just one component of a polyvocal and iterative mesh of decision-making and gatekeeping that intended to make printed discussions of sex digestible for a public audience. The forms and contents of advice books post-publication thus resulted from 'sex experts'—as both authors and readers—publishers, and others negotiating together the complex and often contradictory landscape of sexual culture to draw boundaries around what could legitimately be published in so-called respectable guides to sex, bodies, and desires. This builds on Kate Fisher's work that explored the politics of sexual knowledges 'in debates about what should be known, by whom and in what format' to reorient discussions away from how much

¹¹ Laura Doan, 'Troubling Popularisation: On the Gendered Circuits of a 'Scientific' Knowledge of Sex', *Gender & History*, 31:2 (2019), pp.304-318. More broadly, see also Katy Price, *Loving Faster Than Light: Romance and Readers in Einstein's Universe* (Chicago, 2012), pp.7-10.

people knew, and examine how knowledge was produced, translated, and acquired within and through ‘competing frameworks’.¹²

Chapter Two therefore examines how the boundaries of sexual knowledges were circumscribed within and through reader’s reports and correspondence with ‘sex experts’ in the interwar and post-war periods, with particular attention to the latter. The first half of the chapter examines how ‘sexpertise’ was constructed through these reports, as those reviewing manuscripts for A&U relied on claims of scientific rigour and respectability to assert their own expertise to write on sex, and question and qualify the expertise of others. The mediating of the tone and style of manuscripts was also important within this, demonstrating how ‘sex experts’ sought to gatekeep and moderate not only who could write about sex for a public audience, but *how* they could write about it too. I then use the specialised case study of Dr Helena Wright’s two publications with A&U—one from 1930 and the second from 1968—to delve deeper into how respectability politics, dominant discourses of Christian marital sexuality and eugenics, and concerns over censorship shaped the content and framing of sexual advice within and through the publishing process. This reveals respectability and censorship concerns were pervasive throughout the interwar period and into the 1960s, even if the goal posts of what was acceptable to print were shifting. Moreover, this case study further highlights sexual knowledges as co-produced—in doing so, I argue that women were not simply ‘popularisers’ of sexual knowledges across the interwar and post-war periods, but part of complex, polyvocal networks producing knowledge, visible through close attention to the intricacies of publishing correspondence and reader’s reports.

¹² Kate Fisher, ‘Modern Ignorance’ in Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming and Lauren Kassell, (eds), *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 2018), p.472.

Following this, I again use reader's reports as a starting point to extrapolate how A&U's external and internal readers evoked the imaginary concept of the 'reader' to mediate the circulation of sexual knowledges in advice books. Examining how the intersecting identities of class, gender, age, and generation were used to define who an appropriate audience for a text was, I suggest that prevalent cultural anxieties around the impacts of sexual knowledges on different sections of society moulded the construction of advice books within and through the publishing process. Expanding on this, I argue that the perceived national specificity of sex and sexual behaviour, and the difficulties with exporting and publishing British books abroad in the United States of America in the 1950s and 1960s, profoundly shaped the production of sexual knowledges in advice books and whom they were available to. This again highlights that neat teleologies of sexual repression to liberalisation fail to account for the intricacies of the publishing process and the market factors that pushed and constrained publishing decision-making across the century. Overall, this chapter foregrounds publishers' reader's reports as an underacknowledged yet extremely rich source base—alongside correspondence—for examining the production of ideas about sex, bodies, and desires in print culture as a complex, multi-layered and polyvocal project. In doing so, it contributes to the overall argument of this thesis, proposing that publishers and 'sex experts' as networks of mediating individuals held significant sway over the types and forms of sexual knowledges available to readers across the twentieth century in Britain and beyond.

‘Sexpertise’ and the Curation of Legitimacy

Reader’s reports functioned as a location where ‘sex experts’ could qualify and question another author’s expertise in a review of their manuscript, asserting claims to authority in discussions of sex through using their professional expertise. The nineteenth century is often cast as a time when the division between amateur and professional scientist was created. As Alison Winter has argued, in this period, definitions of science were ‘malleable’, and attempts were made to ‘structure the sciences’ through professionalised and male-dominated scientific organizations, publications, and practices.¹³ Joanna Bourke’s history of women’s roles in the Irish dairy industry across the century is illustrative of the changing landscapes of expertise, knowledge, and authority in the face of professionalisation. As different areas of work and research professionalised in this period, by the turn of the twentieth century, men controlled much of the managerial authorities and led to exclusionary practices impacting women’s roles whilst attempting to draw the boundaries of expertise.¹⁴

Moreover, women’s roles in professionalising areas of work and expertise have in the past often gone underacknowledged by historians, leaving the impression of a smaller cast of characters involved in efforts to carve out expertise and authority. This has been illustrated in Zoë Thomas’s recent work on women’s professional roles in the Arts and Crafts movement which, albeit focusing on the arts rather than science, emphasises the ways in which professional identities and the boundaries of expertise were moveable and contested throughout the

¹³ Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago, 1998), pp.5-6.

¹⁴ Joanna Bourke, ‘Dairywomen and Affectionate Wives: Women in the Irish Dairy Industry, 1890-1914’, *Agricultural History Review*, 38:2 (1990), pp.149-164.

nineteenth and into the twentieth century.¹⁵ Turning back to the professionalisation and masculinisation of science in this period, as Claire G. Jones has explored, a 'systematic gender bias in the allocation of credit in science' has meant that the many active roles in defining scientific expertise women played have been marginalised, 'leaving scientific women mostly behind in the domestic sphere.'¹⁶

The amateur-professional divide, however, was hazy and often disrupted. The authority of scientific expertise could not always be guaranteed. As Winter has also shown, efforts to professionalise and create hierarchy in the realm of science 'did not, in practice, consolidate the sciences or define an authoritative community of practitioners'—what counted as science and expertise was heavily disputed.¹⁷ Those operating in the contested area of sex research therefore faced particular problems in securing legitimacy for their work.¹⁸ In reader's reports, then, authors and publishers sought to legitimise advice books and the sexual knowledges they contained. As Unwin noted, sending manuscripts to specialists in a field allowed for the dissection of subject-specific content, and thus functioned as a peer review process for the production of sexual knowledges that hinged on claims to expertise.¹⁹ Psychiatrist Dr Eustace Chesser—whose early relationship with A&U was detailed in Chapter One—was a prominent reviewer for the company. His connections to Stanley and Philip Unwin rendered him a source

¹⁵ Zoë Thomas, 'Between Art and Commerce: Women, Business Ownership, and the Arts and Crafts Movement', *Past and Present*, 247:1 (2020), pp.151-195.

¹⁶ Claire G. Jones, 'Women, science and professional identity, c.1860-1914' in Heidi Egginton and Zoë Thomas, (eds), *Precarious Professionals: Gender, Identities and Social Change in Modern Britain* (London, 2021), pp.63-64.

¹⁷ Winter, *Mesmerized*, p.6.

¹⁸ Matthew Wale, *Making Entomologists: How Periodicals Shaped Scientific Communities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Pittsburgh, 2022), pp.10-15, 18.

¹⁹ Unwin, *Truth About Publishing*, p.22.

of critique and expertise in the post-war era, with him frequently turning in comments on specialist psychology and sex-related manuscripts.

Chesser often focused on the factual elements of a manuscript to posture his expertise in reader's reports. For example, he pointed out 'one or two errors of a factual nature' in Corner's *Attaining Manhood* and *Attaining Womanhood* despite, he complimented, the 'impression (and I should imagine, quite correctly) that the author is telling [him] the facts of life in a clear, straight and clean-minded manner.'²⁰ The emphasis placed on fact demonstrated Chesser's reliance on scientific and medical discourses surrounding sex, whilst his focus on the 'clean-minded' communication placed a moral value on this information, carving out what he believed to be the borders of legitimate sexual knowledge. Chesser's own work relied on this type of scientific and moral positioning too. Judging by reviews of his publications, it could be successful. For instance, one reviewer wrote of *The Sexual, Marital and Family Relationships of the English Woman* (1956), 'Monumental, statistical, sober in tone [...] it takes a scientific rather than a dirty mind to appreciate their worth.'²¹ This approach to presenting sexual knowledges—marrying social commentary to empirical evidence from statistical research—echoes Marie Stopes's application of scientific method to detail rhythms of sexual feeling in *Married Love* (1918).²²

Scientific rigour and statistical analysis could lend legitimacy to areas of research and discussion that were considered improper or less serious. Since the nineteenth century, science

²⁰ AURR 20/1/76, Eustace Chesser on *Attaining Manhood* and *Attaining Womanhood* by George W. Corner (21 April 1952).

²¹ Virginia Graham, 'Sex or Science', *Spectator*, 197:6699 (1956), p.690.

²² Laura Doan, 'Marie Stopes's Wonderful Rhythm Charts: Normalizing the Natural', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 78:4 (2017), pp.595-620.

had been heralded as objective knowledge that held a valueless precedence over political, cultural, and social debate.²³ As Mary Poovey has argued, statistics were the centre of scepticism and debate, but in the 1830s, discourses around their use gave it the ‘dignity of a science’ whilst simultaneously relegating it to the service of other sciences.²⁴ Over a century later in the 1950s, statistical representations had reached their peak popularity in scientific circles.²⁵ As Roy Porter and Lesley Hall argued, at the turn of the twentieth century, the relationship between sex and science became more definite ‘by, at least in intention and however compromised setting out to apply the rigours of scientific rationality to a highly emotive area [...]’²⁶ Whilst claims that science itself was objective and value-free gave scientific method its legitimacy, its usefulness in applications to studies of sex and sexuality was in its ability to buttress claims about the moral superiority of research into sex, making it ‘clean-minded’ rather than ‘dirty’. Advice manuals relied on technical, medicalised language both to provide practical instructions for their readers, and to render the subject serious and decent.²⁷ Holding other authors to the same standards that his work was held to, Chesser’s reports therefore took on a distinctly authoritative and scientific framing to locate the sexual firmly within the boundaries of legitimate research, as defined by a reliance on ‘serious’ scientific endeavour and empiricism.

²³ Mary Poovey, ‘Figures of Arithmetic, Figures of Speech: The Discourse of Statistics in the 1830s’, *Critical Inquiry*, 19:2 (1993), p. 256.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 257-258.

²⁵ David Howie, *Interpreting Probability: Controversies and Developments in the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 3.

²⁶ Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven, 1995), pp.176-177.

²⁷ Caroline Rusterholz, *Women’s Medicine: Sex, Family Planning and British Female Doctors in Transnational Perspective, 1920-70* (Manchester, 2020), p.62.

Comments on an author's scientific credentials and therefore ability to write on sex could also be negative, illuminating how sex experts often attempted to act as gatekeepers of the production of popular sexual knowledges through diminishing the legitimacy of others. On many occasions, Chesser bluntly dismissed an author's expertise. For instance, he accused one author of having 'little deep knowledge of his subject and little ability to express it in a readable form' making the book 'totally unsuitable' for A&U.²⁸ He believed another author's 'genuine human understanding [was] much too shallow and simplified, and the book [had] obviously been written with too little psychological knowledge and even less conviction.'²⁹ Other readers made comments on expertise and knowledge too. For example, children's sex educator and youth worker Josephine Macalister Brew accused biologist, psychologist, and youth sex educator Leslie Keating of not having a 'full grasp on the psychological side of the question', whilst another reader stated that his manuscript *Attitude to Sex* was not 'worth [A&U's] imprint' from the perspective of sales or as a 'prestige' book on sex.³⁰ Whilst Keating had a record of publishing on sex—for instance, having produced a sex education guide for youth leaders with the Religious Education Press in 1945—his credentials did not protect him from pointed criticism from Macalister Brew, who saw herself as having authority in the realm of youth sex education.³¹

²⁸ AURR 18/1/31, Eustace Chesser on *Sex Hygiene Manual* by Henry Olsen (1950).

²⁹ AURR 19/3/39, Eustace Chesser on *A Psychologist Looks at Sex and Marriage* by Allan Fromme (29 January 1951).

³⁰ Leslie E. Keating, *Sex Education in the Club*, second edition (Wallington, 1946), p.8; AURR 19/2/04, Josephine Macalister Brew on *Attitude to Sex* by Leslie Keating (22 September 1953); AURR 26/1/33, Len Chaloner on *Attitude to Sex* by Leslie Keating (undated).

³¹ Keating, *Sex Education in the Club*. On Josephine Macalister Brew, see James Batsleer, 'Youth work, social education, democratic practice and the challenge of difference: A contribution to debate', *Oxford Review of Education*, 39:3 (2013), p. 292.

Philip Unwin, as an internal reader and editor, participated in this gatekeeping too. In 1955, he wrote to Chesser with a ‘curious production’ titled *Hythmeter* by Gilmore Lee Tilbrook, ‘a “registered professional engineer” who claims to solve completely certain problems which baffle married couples the world over.’³² ‘I don’t imagine it is to be taken seriously by a responsible publisher,’ Unwin remarked to Chesser, ‘but I should be interested to have your views on it and if you feel that it is worth serious consideration.’³³ Tilbrook was an American who, using the title of engineer, had patented his design of a ‘Rhythmeter’ in 1944, a device to track fertility and ascertain when pregnancy was most likely.³⁴ Encouraging Chesser to question Tilbrook’s expertise as he had, Unwin positioned A&U as a ‘responsible’ publisher that only produced a certain, legitimate type of book on sex from a reputable source. These criticisms debased author’s claims to authority on psychological and scientific approaches to sex, suggesting that the knowledge conveyed had to be substantive and deep enough to be publishable.

A&U in a broader sense positioned their company as a respectable publisher that produced authoritative works, claiming that—when undertaking controversial publications—they were firmly in touch with the latest scientific developments. For instance, from 1936, editor Charles Furth took over the educational side of the business, showing a specific interest in biology textbooks. He believed that a change in how text books displayed bodily knowledge was long overdue as up to this point, biological diagrams had been based on the frog because ‘it was

³² University of Reading Special Collections, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Papers, Correspondence (henceforth: AUC) AUC 669/11, letter from Philip Unwin to Eustace Chesser (16 March 1955).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ G.L. Tilbrook, ‘Rhythmeter For Determining Sterility and Fertility’, *United States Patent Office*, No. 2343592 (7 March 1944).

considered indecent to relate them to the human frame.’³⁵ Furth commissioned biologist Richard Palmer to create a text book using human diagrams instead, the first of its kind.³⁶ The implication that the firm was ahead of cultural attitudes to the teaching of bodily knowledge in this context hints towards how he understood their production of sexual knowledge too. It suggests how leaning on scientific and medical authorities to render sex advice books respectable was part of this wider approach that attempted to ensure the firm was considered forward-thinking and challenging of establishment views, but simultaneously respectable.

The repeated focus on books being of suitable prestige for A&U in the reader’s reports therefore illustrates the reputational management that internal reviews and a reliance on perceived external ‘sexpertise’ did when publishing on sex. As Rayner Unwin claimed, the family firm privileged literary merit over the demands of the market, and held in great esteem its history and connections with literary greats.³⁷ Stanley Unwin was ‘incessantly’ worried about the status of British publishing, making reputational management a high priority for his firm.³⁸ Through relying on sex experts with perceived established reputations to critique the expertise of those with more unstable claims to authority, the firm attempted to manage its reputation when publishing on a topic surrounded by taboo and controversy. As Harry G. Cocks has explained, sex was at the centre of debates surrounding the rise of a perceived increasingly excessive, debased, and hedonistic mass culture where expertise was positioned as ‘the antidote’ to the

³⁵ Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About A Publisher: An Autobiographical Record* (London, 1960), p.231. Charles Furth himself wrote educational schoolbooks prior to his time as an editor at A&U: Rayner Unwin, *George Allen & Unwin: A Remembrancer*, p.xi.

³⁶ Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, p.231.

³⁷ Unwin, *Remembrancer*, pp.viii, 1-21, 33-34.

³⁸ Ryder, ‘George Allen & Unwin’, p.75.

sexual problems caused by and symptomatic of such trends.³⁹ Moreover, at a point when cultural products were often simplistically divided into the respectable ‘middlebrow’ and less respectable ‘lowbrow’, expertise was a tool to elevate the cultural status of particular types of knowledge that were seen as in opposition to the sensibilities of the middle classes at which they were largely aimed.⁴⁰ By the 1950s then, when these reader’s reports were written, expertise held significant weight in mediating associations between sex, filth, and obscenity in the context of anxieties around the sexual consequences of proliferating mass culture. It was therefore important for publishers and their readers to weaponize expertise to be able to assert authority in discussions of sex, and thus frame advice books as legitimate modes of circulating sexual knowledges.

Mediating Communication

Publishers, ‘sex experts’, and readers understood that not only were credentials necessary for the ability to print discussions of sex, but the framing and tone used to communicate information was also important. As Stanley Unwin believed, an educational book on sex had to be produced with consideration for its effect on its potential audience.⁴¹ As Matthew Wale has argued in his recent intervention on knowledge production in nineteenth century periodicals, the ‘act of communication’ must be understood as ‘inherent to the construction of knowledge’.⁴² Reader’s reports were thus a location for sex experts to approach the tone, focus, and organisational

³⁹ Harry G. Cocks, ‘Saucy Stories: Pornography, sexology and the marketing of sexual knowledge in Britain, c. 1918-70’, *Social History*, 29:4 (2004), pp.469-470.

⁴⁰ Christopher Hilliard, ‘The Twopenny Library: The Book Trade, Working-Class Readers, and ‘Middlebrow’ Novels in Britain, 1930-42’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25:2 (2014), pp.199-220.

⁴¹ Unwin, *Truth About A Publisher*, pp.173-174.

⁴² Wale, *Making Entomologists*, p.7.

aspects of a manuscript in order to shape how sexual knowledge was communicated. Chesser and others often conveyed either sharp judgement or considerable praise on the writing style, content, and usefulness (or lack thereof) of an author's work. Sometimes critiques sat in between these two extremes. Through this, they attempted to police the nature of communication between those who claimed to be authoritative on sexual knowledges and the reading public. In part, this was done by commenting on the author's written communication including choices of phrasing, but also with thoughts on more practical aspects of a book's publication including structure, content, and decisions about a book's release.

For example, reporting on *Sex Perfection and Marital Happiness* (originally published in New York in 1949) by Rudolf von Urban, an Austrian psychiatrist and psychologist.⁴³ Chesser expressed his distaste for the writer's style, which was at times 'slightly smug' but 'offset by his obvious sincerity', although this was impeded by his phrasing choices: [...] "the locked pincers position" is to my mind an unfortunate expression, and makes me think I am watching an all-in wrestling bout!⁴⁴ Sandwiched between terse praise, Chesser's critique picked up on von Urban's clumsy communication, including his paradoxical attitude and use of tactless expressions which he found unappealing. Seemingly mocking his stylistic choices, Chesser's expressive criticism implied that the presentation of knowledge mattered because if done badly, the ideas conveyed could not be taken seriously. Chesser made even more cutting remarks about

⁴³ Rudolf von Urban, *Sex Perfection and Marital Happiness* (New York, 1949). For biographical details, see Rudolf von Urban, *Myself Not Least; A Confessional Autobiography of a Psychoanalyst and Some Explanatory History Cases* (London, 1958).

⁴⁴ AURR 18/3/41, Eustace Chesser on *Sex Perfection and Marital Happiness* by Rudolf von Urban (17 April 1950).

Roger Pilkington, an author and biologist best known for his works on boating in Europe.⁴⁵ On his manuscript for *Love Lies Ahead*, Chesser wrote: ‘This book is very disappointing [...] The style is irritating, pretentious, and altogether much too prim, proper and Godly.’⁴⁶ Chesser’s comments circumvented any of the niceties afforded to von Urban, perhaps reflective of Chesser’s snobbishness about the author’s professional identity and inexperience with writing on sex. The contrast between his opinions that von Urban’s tone was not serious enough and that Pilkington’s style was too serious highlights the tricky balancing act authors writing on sex had to partake in to make sure their work was seen as legitimate.

On a more practical level, readers helped guide the formatting of books on sex through their reports. Suggestions to take out chapters or add in discussions of different topics to improve a manuscript constituted a smaller but still important aspect of the reader’s feedback. For instance, in his review of von Urban’s book, Chesser recommended cutting a whole chapter on impotence and frigidity.⁴⁷ He believed Keating’s manuscript was ‘somewhat repetitive and could do with condensation’, including editing the ‘misleading’ subtitle (‘The adolescent needs Romance’). Instead, he recommended using ‘Self-Expression’ in place of ‘Romance’.⁴⁸ As these two texts were not published by A&U it is impossible to discern whether the firm would have included these suggested revisions had they produced the books. Considering negative reviews correlated with these manuscripts being dropped, however, it is reasonable to assume that readers’ opinions were often listened to.

⁴⁵ *The New York Times*, ‘Roger Pilkington, British Author, 88’ (24 May 2003). Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/24/arts/roger-pilkington-british-author-88.html> (Accessed: 9 November 2022).

⁴⁶ AURR 22/2/12, Eustace Chesser on *Love Lies Ahead* by Roger Pilkington (22 June 1954).

⁴⁷ AURR 18/3/41, Eustace Chesser on *Sex Perfection and Marital Happiness* by Rudolf von Urban (17 April 1950).

⁴⁸ AURR 21/8, Eustace Chesser on *Attitude to Sex* by Leslie Keating (30 June 1953).

Critiques of tone and style in reader's reports could be inconsistent and competing, meaning the process was not always straightforward. Frequently, publishers' readers differed in their opinions of a text, as was the case with Keating's *Attitude to Sex*. One critical review came from Macalister Brew. Qualifying her comments with the fact that she knew and liked Keating, she acknowledged that whilst there was a need for books on sex, 'this is not the book. This book seems too personal and, therefore, rather off-putting [...].'⁴⁹ Macalister Brew clearly valued empiricism and fact over personal expression in this context. Alternatively, Chesser dispensed high praise for the exact stylistic choices she disliked: 'The author is obviously an enthusiast for his cause and writes from first-hand, personal experience. He uses non-technical language and writes unpretentiously.'⁵⁰

As Katherine Jones has shown, expertise trumped the personal and subjective in the popular cultural context of conveying information about sex until the 1960s.⁵¹ However, the differences in 'sex expert' feedback here emphasise that the division between the prominence of expertise and the value of personal experience must not be oversimplified. As seen in earlier publications on sex, such as Stopes's *Married Love*, science and empiricism was often used to investigate and prove tangential subjective experiences. Doan's analysis of Stopes's use of 'Rhythm Charts' initiated by her own unfulfilling experiences of sex and her encounter with women who shared their sexual struggles has elucidated this relationship.⁵² Thus these contrasting reviews reveal

⁴⁹ AURR 19/2/04, Josephine Macalister Brew on *Attitude to Sex* by Leslie Keating (22 September 1953).

⁵⁰ AURR 21/8, Eustace Chesser on *Attitude to Sex* by Leslie Keating (30 June 1953).

⁵¹ Katherine Jones, 'Claims to (S)expertise in the British Sex Survey, c. 1960s-1990s', *Social History of Medicine* (2022), p.2.

⁵² Doan, 'Marie Stopes's Wonderful Rhythm Charts', pp.595-620.

the complexity of discourses around ‘sexpertise’ and the communication of sexual knowledges. They show that competing claims to authority on sex based on differing understandings of which forms of knowledge production were valuable pushed against each other to mediate what information was available for the reading public, and how. These examples also highlight how publishers’ expert readers worked to mediate the tone and style of manuscripts before publication, but they also illustrate the varying success of attempts to gatekeep and shape sexual knowledges through this medium. All three books by von Urban, Pilkington, and Keating were rejected for publication in Britain by A&U despite some positive comments, but likely because of the harsh critiques the publisher was presented with.

Expert reader comments on Corner’s *Attaining Womanhood* and *Attaining Manhood* exemplify how experts with competing notions of what made a book suitable or unsuitable for publication jostled to make their voices heard by the publisher. The former was partially altered according to Evelyn Unwin’s comments. She recommended the removal of a chapter on birth control, and this did not appear in the A&U edition, but in contrast, suggestions to remove a chapter on ‘the scientific study of sex’ were not taken notice of, as it remained in the published book.⁵³ There were varying views of the physical production of the companion volumes too. On the one hand, Chesser believed that *Attaining Manhood* and *Attaining Womanhood* should be merged into a single volume because ‘the sexes should know something of each other, and I should have thought it would have been much more sensible and effective to publish one book, titled, say, “Attaining Adulthood”.’⁵⁴ On the other hand, Secretary of the British Social Biology Council

⁵³ AURR 20/1/75 Evelyn Unwin on *Attaining Womanhood* by George R. Corner (25 March 1952); Corner, *Attaining Womanhood* (London, 1953), pp.92-99.

⁵⁴ AURR 20/1/76, Eustace Chesser on *Attaining Manhood* and *Attaining Womanhood* by George W. Corner (21 April 1952).

(BSBC), Eleanor French, also reviewed these books stating that they would be ‘most useful published separately and not together’, whilst another reviewer posited that the two books should be released at the same time as there would be a loss of sales if the firm waited for one to do well before releasing the other.⁵⁵ Allen & Unwin did publish these books in two distinct companion volumes in 1953, ignoring Chesser’s suggestion, and listening to the majority opinion of the reviewers.⁵⁶

We know that the Unwin family valued Chesser’s expertise as proven through his sustained relationship with Philip and repeated requests to review manuscripts. However, ultimately, even a favoured reader’s opinion did not trump the collated opinions of several other readers in the context of a manuscript the publisher was uncertain about. It also came second to the final decisions of the publishers themselves, as Stanley Unwin maintained in one of his memoirs.⁵⁷ Thus it is apparent that reader’s reports were an important space for sex experts and those with interest in the production of sexual knowledges to mediate the communication methods of others and ultimately gatekeep the types and styles of the knowledges available to the reading public in advice books. However, it is simultaneously important to recognise the significant gatekeeping role the publisher themselves played that was sometimes, but not always, influenced by the expertise of others. The editorial process for advice literature manuscripts was therefore a complex one, burgeoning with competing interests and iterative exchanges

⁵⁵ AURR 20/1/78, Eleanor French on *Attaining Womanhood* and *Attaining Manhood* by George W. Corner (21 April 1952); AURR 20/1/77, P.M. Bradbury on *Attaining Womanhood* and *Attaining Manhood* by George W. Corner (undated). The British Social Biology Council, formerly the British Social Hygiene Council, was an organisation started to combat venereal diseases which moved into promoting the teaching of biology education in schools as a long-term solution to this: R.L. Smith, ‘Biology and Human Affairs’, *Nature*, 4493 (10 December 1955), p.1111.

⁵⁶ Corner, *Attaining Manhood* (London, 1953); Corner, *Attaining Womanhood* (London, 1953).

⁵⁷ Unwin, *Truth About Publishing*, p.27.

between different fields and levels of expertise. Consequently, this analysis has demonstrated how knowledge production and circulation cannot be described as linear as the ‘popularisation’ model purports, even when it was built on hierarchical assumptions about expertise, because of the messy, changeable nature of the processes behind the production of these texts.

From Helena Wright’s *Sex Factor* to a ‘New Code’ for Sex: Respectability Politics and the Publishing of Advice Literature

Dr Helena Wright’s work is a specialised case study that further illustrates the conversational nature of publishing books on sex and the production of sexual knowledges and highlights the persistence of concerns over the respectability and framing of advice literature from the interwar period into the 1960s. In 1966, Wright contacted Philip Unwin to discuss the potential for her latest manuscript intended for a popular audience, *Sex and Society: A New Code for Sexual Behaviour* (1968).⁵⁸ This ‘New Code’ for education and behaviour was intended to be a radical reimagining of what Britain’s sexual life could be like, free from the perceived restrictions and mores of previous decades.⁵⁹ In negotiating for the publication of this manuscript, Wright drew on memories of the production of her first book, *The Sex Factor in Marriage: A book for those who are about to be married* (1930) by Williams & Norgate, then an imprint of A&U presided over by Stanley Unwin, who had the ‘courage’ to support her work.

⁵⁸ AUC 1141/21, letter from Helena Wright to Philip Unwin (4 August 1966); Helena Wright, *Sex and Society: A New Code for Sexual Behaviour* (London, 1968).

⁵⁹ Wright, *Sex and Society*, pp.9-10.

As Wright recalled, *Sex Factor* was ‘undoubtedly saved’ by the quotation from the Archbishop of Canterbury on the cover.⁶⁰ The quotation in the front of the book read:

I would rather have all the risks which come from free discussion of sex than the great risks we run by a conspiracy of silence.... I notice how silence has given place to complete and free discussion. In my judgement this is a great improvement.⁶¹

This was paired with an introduction by Presbyterian minister and advice author Arthur Herbert Gray. He unreservedly endorsed Wright’s mission to educate engaged couples *because* of his position as a minister and the guilt he felt that in many marriages he had performed, the couple were likely to be sexually ignorant. He exclaimed that he had been ‘longing for years that some such book as [*Sex Factor*] might become available’, and that to prevent misery and attain ‘joy’ in married life was ‘surely a religious interest.’⁶² Implying and directly including support for the book from familiar figures with established claims to religious and consequently moral authority was necessary to soften the frank discussion of sex Wright initiated in the book’s pages.⁶³ As Wright later pointed out to Philip Unwin, the ‘respectability’ of *Sex Factor* had not been self-evident.⁶⁴

The focus on monogamous marriage as a legitimate location for sexual relations mimicked Stopes’s characterisation of mutually satisfying, companionate love. Famously, *Married Love*

⁶⁰ AUC 1141/21, letter from Helena Wright to Philip Unwin (4 August 1966); Helena Wright, *The Sex Factor in Marriage: A book for those who are about to be married*, third edition (London, 1945).

⁶¹ Wright, *Sex Factor*, p.8.

⁶² Ibid, pp.20-21.

⁶³ Ibid, pp.5, 9-12.

⁶⁴ AUC 1141/21, letter from Helena Wright to Philip Unwin (4 August 1966).

had packaged sex advice in spiritual language, advocating for a ‘new epoch’ where science and religion met and allowed for spiritually satisfying marital relations.⁶⁵ In 1930, then, leaning on religious authorities and the sanctity of heterosexual, monogamous marriage was one tried and tested way to render a book on sex more acceptable, as when placed firmly within these boundaries, sex became more speakable. As Cocks and others have reminded us, heterosexual marriage from the interwar period was positioned as the only culturally sanctioned site for sexual expression, a trope which books such as *Sex Factor* and those by Stopes produced, reproduced, and reinforced through the rhetoric of mutually satisfactory sexual relations between husband and wife.⁶⁶ With heterosexuality being an unstable identity that was still being constructed at this point, as Laura Doan and others have argued, the realm of marital sexuality was a site through which advice literature was constituting its boundaries.⁶⁷ It follows, then, that many sex manual authors between 1918 and the 1970s came from religious backgrounds or embedded their advice within spiritual rhetoric.⁶⁸

Wright’s self-conscious positioning of her work with the values and aims of religious authorities and institutions was one way to associate the discussion of sex with respectability and thus legitimise the publication. Through using quotations from the Archbishop of Canterbury and an

⁶⁵ Stopes, *Married Love*, p.xix. On Stopes, spirituality, and religion, see Alexander Geppert, ‘Divine Sex, Happy Marriage, Regenerated Nation: Marie Stopes’s Marital Manual ‘Married Love’ and the Making of a Best-Seller, 1918-1955’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8:3 (1998), pp.404-405; Paul Peppis, ‘Rewriting Sex: Mina Loy, Marie Stopes, and Sexology’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 9:4 (2002), pp.562-564.

⁶⁶ Cocks, ‘Saucy Stories’, p. 469. See also Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An intimate history of men and women in twentieth-century Britain* (London, 2003), pp.3, 4-5, 90-133.

⁶⁷ Laura Doan, “A peculiarly obscure subject’: the missing ‘case’ of the heterosexual’ in Brian Lewis, (ed), *British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives* (Manchester, 2013), pp.87-108; Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, first published 1995 Chicago, 2007), pp.57-112.

⁶⁸ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English women, sex, and contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford, 2004), p.343.

introduction by Gray, Wright was appealing to what Alana Harris has called the ‘cross-party consensus’ in the 1930s that marriage had an important role as the foundation of community and society.⁶⁹ Their similar emphasis on the importance of sex education for the functioning and survival of marriage suggests how drawing the boundaries and roles of modern marriage was something that brought together voices from differing denominational backgrounds in the name of the bigger cause of improving and solidifying the institution of marriage.

However, it is too simplistic to argue, as Marcus Collins has done, that Christian perspectives ‘exercised a virtual monopoly over marriage and sex manuals’ for the half century after the First World War.⁷⁰ Collins neatly divided sex advice writers into ‘Christian Mutualists’ and ‘Sex Radicals’, failing to take seriously the complexity and interrelated nature of these two positions, as well as glossing over the variations in religious belief and approaches to sex and marriage under the broad umbrella of Christianity.⁷¹ Some ‘sex experts’, for instance, did not even adhere to particular religious framings, including Eustace Chesser who was secular.⁷² Harris’s work on the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council (CMAC)—set up to work alongside the Marriage Guidance Council (MGC) started by Gray—has explored efforts of figures from different denominational backgrounds to organise and give marital advice. Organisations set up simultaneously supported and competed with one another, highlighting how even under a broader consensus about the importance of marriage, thinking on the specifics of sexual and marital relationships varied.⁷³ This illustrates that whilst religion played a defining role in the

⁶⁹ Alana Harris, ‘Love Divine and Love Sublime: The Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, the Marriage Guidance Movement and the State’ in Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones, (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970* (Basingstoke, 2014), p.188.

⁷⁰ Collins, *Modern Love*, p.90.

⁷¹ Collins, *Modern Love*, p.90.

⁷² *Ibid*, p.188.

⁷³ Harris, ‘Love Divine and Love Sublime’, pp.188-191.

framing of modern marriage and sexual relationships in advice literature, it is important to avoid too much generalisation. Religious rhetoric can be understood in this context as a tool used by advice authors and publishers to appeal to a wider religiously inspired discourse somewhat cut through denominational differences surrounding the importance and social functions of strong, monogamous, and heterosexual marriages.

Complicating this further, Lisa Z. Sigel has explained how sexuality within marriage in popular interwar advice books like *Married Love* was conceptualised as the foundation of the eugenically-strong state, and thus achieving sexual fulfilment was an essential aim for the future of Britain.⁷⁴ Whilst Wright was not an extremely active member of the British Eugenics Society (BES) like Stopes was, her path crossed regularly with others involved in the organisation, and birth control rhetoric at the time by default deployed understandings of the social and cultural role of marriage derived from eugenicist thought.⁷⁵ Eugenics was deeply and inseparably tied into the birth control movement in Britain, as contraceptives were foremost means of population control with eugenic aims.⁷⁶ Whilst Hera Cook has shown that the majority of authors she has located of sex advice manuals did not belong to the BES or the American equivalent, the associations between birth control, marital advice, and eugenics must not be ignored.⁷⁷ Playing on acute anxieties around population decline and quality that were particularly felt in the interwar period—the fallout of the decline of empire, population, labour unrest, and

⁷⁴ Lisa Z. Sigel, *Making Modern Love: Sexual Narratives and Identities in Interwar Britain* (Philadelphia, 2012), pp.50-51. See also Richard Allen Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England, 1877-1930* (Chapel Hill, 1982), pp.208-232.

⁷⁵ Barbara Evans, *Freedom to Choose: The Life and Work of Dr Helena Wright, Pioneer of Contraception* (London, 1984), pp.143, 213, 228, 259; Rusterholz, *Women's Medicine*, pp.38-47.

⁷⁶ Jane Carey, 'The racial imperatives of sex: birth control and eugenics in Britain, the United States and Australia in the interwar years', *Women's History Review*, 21:5 (2012), pp.733-752.

⁷⁷ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, p.343.

destabilising gender roles causing concern over national stability—advice literature was culturally salient at this time because it offered reassurance and solutions.⁷⁸

Given the prominence of religious conceptualisations of modern marriage and the prevalence of eugenics-based discourse around reproductive sexuality, the choices made for *Sex Factor* by its publisher and author were thus productive in shoring up the respectability of such a book that explicitly dealt with sex. However, it is important to recognise that no book on sex was guaranteed to be viewed as respectable or legitimate, even within this framing. Williams & Norgate faced difficulties advertising *Sex Factor* in religious magazine *The Christian World*, with Stanley Unwin expressing ‘surprise’ at the advertisement being refused.⁷⁹ The culturally ambiguous nature of sexual knowledges meant that issues with producing and distributing books were common, thus a cautious attitude to their publication was necessary. In Unwin’s words, books on sex required ‘very careful study in view of [their] frankness on a subject which is rather tabooed.’⁸⁰ Moreover, as discussed, with the increasingly varied beliefs around sexuality and marriage within religious circles it is unsurprising that books on sex faced restriction and opposition regardless of their framing as the ideas and assumptions they contained were often contested in this context.

⁷⁸ Lucy Bland and Lesley Hall, ‘Eugenics in Britain: the view from the metropole’, in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 213-216; Soloway, *Birth Control*, pp.159-303.

⁷⁹ AUC 26/24, note from Bernard Langdon-Davies to Stanley Unwin (3 July 1930); AUC 26/24, letter from Stanley Unwin to Bernard Langdon-Davies (7 July 1930).

⁸⁰ AUC 26/24, letter from Stanley Unwin to Bernard Langdon-Davies (12 November 1930). Unwin’s comment here was about Janet Chance’s *The Cost of English Morals* (London, 1931). Despite Unwin and Langdon-Davies discussing the potential of Chance’s manuscript, it was not published by Williams & Norgate, but instead by Noel Douglas.

The ways in which Wright drew on the work of others to inform her publications is also significant, as it exposes knowledge as a process of co-production that relied on the interaction of different forms of expertise. When producing *Sex and Society*, Wright used case histories, legal changes around abortion and homosexuality, and advocacy of the universal use of contraception to construct a 'New Code' for sex education and sexual behaviour, mapping what she believed was a modern, radical approach to sexual knowledges and practices.⁸¹ She had suggested to Unwin that the 'general form' for this book should be influenced by Gordon Rattray Taylor's *Sex in History* (1954). Taylor was a British author specialising in popular books on broad scientific and social issues; *Sex in History* was intended for a non-specialist readership. Whilst this was not one of his two bestsellers, it was reissued in 1970, suggesting its popularity.⁸² Wright's justification for this was that:

The facts of life in England starting from Saxon times are more hair raising than anything that is happening at present. There is an extensive bibliography so everything can be checked. This suggests to me a general form for the book in three sections [...]. A historical background of this sort will both give the whole contents much more weight and bring into still more startling contrast the suggestions for the future as compared with the past.⁸³

This passage indicates how Wright's writing was shaped by her wider reading of work on sex by other authors, even across disciplines. Arguing that Taylor's historical expertise could

⁸¹ Wright, *Sex and Society*, pp.9-10.

⁸² P.W. Hasler, 'Obituary: Gordon Rattray Taylor', *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*, 51 (1982), p.405; Gordon Rattray Taylor, *Sex in History* (New York, 1954), frontmatter and author biography.

⁸³ AUC 1141/21, letter from Helena Wright to Philip Unwin (8 November 1966).

provide important context for her social argument for a 'New Code' for sex, Wright's letter readily admitted her own lack of knowledge in that particular area. Wright and Taylor exchanged letters during the editorial process of *Sex and Society* about acquiring rights from his publisher, Thames & Hudson, to quote from *Sex in History*. Taylor was supportive of Wright's work, although he disagreed on how much of his writing she should embed. He also asked her for reading recommendations on the development of oral contraceptives for a book he was writing, emphasising the reciprocal nature of this exchange.⁸⁴ Taylor did not publish a book solely on contraception during his career, however, *The Biological Timebomb* released in 1968 did discuss contraception and fertility control extensively, likely influenced by his conversations with Wright, albeit he did not acknowledge this in the text itself.⁸⁵

Focusing on Wright's publications though, through deferring in part to another popular author's expertise, the author could further legitimise her own work whilst maintaining an authoritative voice on the parts of the topic more familiar to her: marital sexual relationships and contraception. She was as influenced by non-medical, self-styled popular writers as she was by scientists, sexologists, and her own medical training. As she had perhaps anticipated, this choice to draw on Taylor's work was to her benefit. In an otherwise harsh and discouraging reader's report by A&U's editor Peter Leek, the introduction inspired by Taylor's work was praised as a 'fascinating' account of historic attitudes to sex, despite him feeling the rest of the book had left much to be desired.⁸⁶ Likewise, Taylor relied on Wright for medical and scientific information

⁸⁴ AUC 1190/7, letter from Gordon Rattray Taylor to Helena Wright (21 March 1967); letter from Gordon Rattray Taylor to Helena Wright (8 March 1967).

⁸⁵ See Gordon Rattray Taylor, *The Biological Time Bomb* (London, 1968), pp.22-55.

⁸⁶ AURR 29/5/20, Peter Leek on *The New Sexual Code* by Helena Wright (c. 1967). *The New Sexual Code* was the provisional title for *Sex and Society* when it was submitted for Leek's reader review.

about contraceptives for his work, demonstrating that the production of books on sex was an iterative conversation between different levels of expertise and disciplines. This echoes recent historiographical arguments that suggest scientific knowledge more broadly was co-produced rather than diffused in more straightforwardly hierarchical ways.⁸⁷

It is important to note, then, that the ways in which women ‘sex experts’ and publishers self-consciously leant into prominent, culturally relevant discourses and worked with other types of expertise does not diminish these advice books as efforts to *produce* knowledge, as well as simply ‘popularise’ it. Women have often been referred to as ‘popularisers’ in the context of sexual science.⁸⁸ As Doan has argued in relation to Stopes’s books, some historians have implied she simply adopted a scientific rhetoric to shield against accusations of pornography and obscenity, thereby underestimating her role as a scientist and empirical researcher.⁸⁹ Likewise, Wright’s clever framing of her books was underpinned by her extensive medical and gynaecological experience and her work with clients at her birth control and sexual advice clinic.⁹⁰ Whilst Caroline Rusterholz has argued that women contraceptive doctors such as Wright were increasingly recognised for their expertise through their participation in international medical communities, conferences, and organisations, I add that Wright’s working relationship with Taylor and the careful positioning of her advice books was as important to the curation of her ‘expert’ identity as her practical medical and scientific work.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Wale, *Making Entomologists*, pp.7-10; Peter Mandler, ‘Good Reading for the Million: The ‘Paperback Revolution’ and the Co-Production of Academic Knowledge in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain and America’, *Past & Present*, 244 (2019), pp.235-269.

⁸⁸ Collins, *Modern Love*, pp.37-38; Sigel, *Making Modern Love*, p.3; Geppert ‘Divine Sex’, pp.389-433; Peter Neushul, ‘Marie C. Stopes and the Popularization of Birth Control Technology’, *Technology and Culture*, 39:2 (1998), pp.245-272.

⁸⁹ Doan, ‘Marie Stopes’s Wonderful Rhythm Charts’, p.603.

⁹⁰ Rusterholz, *Women’s Medicine*, p.38, 61-71.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.71.

Additionally, Wright's letters reveals the persistence of concerns over the respectability and legality of books on sex into the 1960s, showing that it is overly simplistic to associate the increasing production of popular books on sex with a neat teleology of liberalising sexual culture. Wright questioned whether they could shore up the legitimacy of *Sex and Society* as they had done with *Sex Factor* over thirty years prior: 'Perhaps we could find a similar quotation to support the respectability of this book?'⁹² Back in 1930, Williams & Norgate had been 'so nervous of the reactions of the police that they buried three typescripts, two in England and one in France, in case the police should have raided the office on the day of publication and confiscated the whole edition!'⁹³ Whilst this incident was retold by Wright as an amusing anecdote in the process of convincing A&U to take on her new publication, the suggestion to contextualise *Sex and Society* in a similar way to *Sex Factor* gestures towards continued anxieties over the fraught position of publishing books on sex.

The censorship landscape in Britain had undoubtedly changed by the time Wright was corresponding with Philip Unwin about *Sex and Society*. Britain's censorship of publishers and booksellers was widespread if disparate from the seventeenth century. By the interwar period, the seizure and physical destruction of books was a routine part of government policy with the intention of full removal of texts rather than just suppression, and definitions of obscenity were slippery and unevenly applied, explaining the publisher's anxieties with *Sex Factor*.⁹⁴ However,

⁹² AUC 1141/21, letter from Helena Wright to Philip Unwin (4 August 1966).

⁹³ AUC 1141/21, letter from Helena Wright to Philip Unwin (4 August 1966); Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, p.153.

⁹⁴ Lisa Z. Sigel, 'Censorship and Inter-War Britain: Obscenity, Spectacle, and the Workings of the Liberal State', *Journal of Social History*, 45:1 (2011), pp.63-64; Cocks, 'Saucy Stories', p.468.

as Hilliard has argued, the trial of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) six years prior 'was the last sortie of a convention that had held since the nineteenth century: that material the authorities would ban if it were produced for a mass audience did not necessarily warrant prohibition if it was directed toward a privileged readership [...].'⁹⁵ By the 1960s, A&U had set a precedent for itself as a publisher willing to push the boundaries of censorship, with, for example, Stanley Unwin describing the prosecution of the 'honest and beautifully written' *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as 'intolerable'.⁹⁶ The trial had emboldened many publishers, however, there was simultaneously substantial backlash to the liberalisation and democratisation of reading and sexual content.⁹⁷ Despite this shifting context and A&U's willingness to challenge censorship, then, it was clear that Wright remained cognisant of the potential backlash to her book.

This is further highlighted in later correspondence where Wright decided that the risks of involving other authors or important figures in the potential controversies of *Sex and Society* were too great: '[...] the book does not need a foreword. I would rather be unsupported so as to run no risk of involving anyone else in case there is any kind of fuss about the book [...].'⁹⁸ It is undoubtable that *Sex and Society* was *meant* to be controversial. It permitted extramarital sexual relationships—as long as this did not damage the marital relationship—the denial of sexual fidelity, possessiveness and jealousy, and demanded privacy around all sexual

⁹⁵ Christopher Hilliard, "Is It A Book That You Would Even Wish Your Wife or Your Servants to Read?" *Obscenity Law and the Politics of Reading in Modern England*, *The American Historical Review*, 118:3 (2013), pp.653-654.

⁹⁶ AUC 889/13, letter from Stanley Unwin to Sir William Haley, Editor, *The Times* (18 August 1960).

⁹⁷ Christopher Hilliard, *A Matter of Obscenity: The Politics of Censorship in Modern England* (Princeton, 2021), pp.2, 108, 115-118; Hilliard 'Obscenity Law and the Politics of Reading', pp.653-654.

⁹⁸ AUC 1190/7, letter from Helena Wright to Peter Leek (27 November 1967).

encounters other than the public marital relationship.⁹⁹ Wright also condemned societal and legal attitudes to homosexuality as ‘irrational’ and ‘hypocritical’, albeit acknowledging the ‘satisfactory’ improvement of the law with *The Sexual Offences Act* (1967).¹⁰⁰ Wright had been less publicly pushing back against these conventions in her clinical work since the 1930s, suggesting to patients that extramarital affairs were evidence of a ‘rich personality’ and encouraging patients to seek sexual fulfilment beyond the marital bed.¹⁰¹ However, *Sex and Society* was the first foray into making these views more obviously public, and Wright wanted to cause a stir. She was often attempting to be purposefully controversial, especially in her older age.¹⁰²

Despite the shifting sexual mores of the 1960s, a complete ‘revolution’ in attitudes towards sex had not taken place. Sexuality was still a contested sphere where, whilst social norms liberalised in some ways, they paradoxically generated new social, cultural, and legislative restrictions in others. By the 1970s, mores such as the refusal to equally acknowledge homosexual relationships with heterosexual relationships and the policing of sexuality in both public and private contexts inspired by backlash to changing patterns of sexual behaviour limited the reach and impact of liberalising attitudes, leaving discontinuities between representations and experiences.¹⁰³ The pervasiveness of considerations around respectable opinions and attitudes towards sex in this context is even more evident in the editorial correspondence between Philip

⁹⁹ Wright, *Sex and Society*, p.91.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, pp.40, 60-63.

¹⁰¹ Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, pp.173, 191.

¹⁰² Ibid, p.173.

¹⁰³ Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge, 2000), pp.169-173; Frank Mort, ‘Striptease: The erotic female body and live sexual entertainment in mid-twentieth-century London’, *Social History*, 32:1 (2007), p.53; Daisy Payling and Tracey Loughran, ‘Nude Bodies in British Women’s Magazines at the Turn of the 1970s: Agency, Spectatorship, and the Sexual Revolution’, *Social History of Medicine*, 35:4 (2022), pp.1356-1385.

Unwin and Wright, where Unwin asked for clarifications on her lack of consideration of the position of children in familial relationships where adult partners had sexual relations beyond their marriage.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, as Cook has illustrated, even into the 1970s, even where authors increasingly reassured readers their desires were acceptable, ‘heterosexual coitus remained the main dish’ on the menu of sexual behaviours that readers encountered.¹⁰⁵ Hence, pushing the boundaries of respectability and legality in the 1960s still ran risks for author and publisher, even if the terms of what constituted a radical approach to sex were changing.

Thus this case study therefore illustrates that despite legal changes and shifting cultural attitudes to sex by the 1960s, censorship and the cultural ambiguity of respectable discussions of sex were persistent concerns throughout the period, if defined by shifting goal posts of what could and could not be expressed in print. Cook has used an analysis of advice manuals across the twentieth century to buttress the narrative of ‘sexual revolution’, however, looking into the production process of such books as Wright’s nuances this teleology.¹⁰⁶ To navigate notions of respectability and censorship concerns, ‘sexpertise’ was constructed through reader’s reports and correspondence with publishers and between authors, illustrating the multiple and varied ways in which those involved sought to produce authoritative advice. The presence of competing voices in the conversation around respectable advice is illustrated by the ways in which ‘sex experts’ and publishers together attempted to mediate and gatekeep who produced sexual knowledges and how it was communicated. To build on this, the next part of this chapter explores how these processes of mediation defined who advice was *for* in addition to who produced advice books, what they contained, and how they were presented.

¹⁰⁴ AUC 1141/21, letter from Philip Unwin to Helena Wright (22nd August 1966).

¹⁰⁵ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, p.244.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, pp.224, 338-340.

Imagining Audiences, Evoking the ‘Reader’

Publishers’ expert readers often evoked the theoretical ‘reader’ of a manuscript when making suggestions about if and how to publish it, hinting towards another significant yet overlooked way that advice books and therefore sexual knowledges were shaped within and through the publishing process. Considering how their imagined audience would react to a particular topic, turn of phrase, argument, or structure was common in reader’s reports, the majority of which used in this chapter are from the 1950s and 1960s. This is foremost revealing of the post-war market conditions that underpinned publishing decisions, and the navigation of social and cultural taboos as well as legal restrictions that determined where and for whom a book was suitable. Recently, Wale’s work on nineteenth century entomological periodicals argued using a similar framing that reading communities were ‘imagined’ by editors and contributors to publications because the majority never met or communicated, yet the act of engaging with the publication rendered them part of an abstract community.¹⁰⁷ In the context of reader’s reports on advice literature, the imagined audience represents an analytic framework used by sex experts to theorise the reach, impact, and meanings of a particular text. The theoretical ‘reader’ of a book had different, intersecting identities: class, gender, education level, profession, and age could all colour in the outline of who an audience was supposed to be. Imagining a book’s readership was therefore another way for sex experts, readers, and publishers to legitimise books on sex with careful gatekeeping of who they were intended for. In this way, readers’ reports were used to further moderate and control the communication of sexual knowledges.

¹⁰⁷ Wale, *Making Entomologists*, p.6.

Through evoking the ‘reader’, publishers’ expert readers embedded prevalent cultural anxieties around the discussion of sex into their reviews, revealing much of the expectations and norms that publishers and authors played into when producing what were intended to be respectable books on sex. Chesser regularly evoked the ‘reader’ perspective in his critique of manuscripts, much of which described the relative levels of expertise that a book would be suitable for. For example, he noted that the case histories used by von Urban in *Sex Perfection and Marital Happiness* would be ‘good for the more average reader’.¹⁰⁸ In contrast, when writing on American psychologist Allan Fromme’s *A Psychologist Looks at Sex and Marriage*, he admonished its lack of suitability for the ‘ordinary lay reader’, whom he said would find it ‘irritating’.¹⁰⁹

The use of ‘average’ and ‘ordinary’ as adjectives to position the reader’s relative knowledge, expertise, and intelligence as a determinant of what types of sexual knowledge they should be allowed to access as decided by authors and publishers. Claire Langhamer has noted how in the decade immediately after the Second World War, advice literature ‘utilised ideas of ordinariness to facilitate the creation of a happy, home-focused audience.’¹¹⁰ These terms were exclusionary and unstable, and who they encapsulated was dependent on context; it was both a term intended to include specific types of people, and one that lacked concrete boundaries at the same time. Congruent with Langhamer’s argument, in the period in question, the ‘ordinary’ was intended

¹⁰⁸ AURR 18/3/41, Eustace Chesser on *Sex Perfection and Marital Happiness* by Rudolf von Urban (17 April 1950).

¹⁰⁹ AURR 19/3/39, Eustace Chesser on *A Psychologist Looks at Sex and Marriage* by Allan Fromme (29 January 1951). On Allan Fromme, see Eric Nagourney, ‘Allan Fromme, Psychologist and Writer, 87, Dies’, *The New York Times* (2 February 2003). Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/02/obituaries/allan-fromme-psychologist-and-writer-87-dies.html> (Accessed: 3 July 2023).

¹¹⁰ Claire Langhamer, ‘Who the hell are ordinary people?’ Ordinariness as a category of historical analysis’, *Transactions of the RHS*, 28 (2018), p.178.

to name ‘desirable traits’, defined by qualities such as decency and common-sense.¹¹¹ Chesser’s inclusion of what had become common phrasing in popular culture hinted towards these themes, showing how he imagined the ‘right’ type of respectable reader for advice books, sometimes defined by what they would find of value, and sometimes by what they would not.

Expert readers occasionally included comments on the professional identities of those that a book would be appropriate for, further entrenching notions of the suitability of sexual knowledges dictated by class status. For example, Chesser suggested Leslie Keating’s *Attitude to Sex* would have been suitable for ‘teachers, youth-leaders etc’.¹¹² However, Macalister Brew, herself a youth club organiser, could not understand whether Keating’s manuscript was aimed at ‘Club Leaders, teachers, parents or adolescents’, but she was sure it would ‘give offence to all these prospective readers’.¹¹³ These differing opinions on Keating’s book illustrate the instability of understandings of how evolving ideas about sex should be communicated to different sections of society. In Chesser’s similarly negative review of Fromme’s manuscript that had suggested it would be ‘irritating’ to the ‘ordinary lay reader’, Chesser commented that the book was ‘not sufficiently technical for the serious reader or professional man’ either.¹¹⁴

Chesser’s suggestion here—that the professional middle-class needed serious complexity and technical language, whilst lower-class readers needed simplicity and to not be discouraged by a text—reinforced notions of class-based reading abilities and habits that had dominated

¹¹¹ Ibid, pp.184, 186.

¹¹² AURR 21/8, Eustace Chesser on *Attitude to Sex* by Leslie Keating (30 June 1953).

¹¹³ AURR 19/2/04, Josephine Macalister Brew on *Attitude to Sex* by Leslie Keating (22 September 1953).

¹¹⁴ AURR 19/3/39, Eustace Chesser on *A Psychologist Looks at Sex and Marriage* by Allan Fromme (29 January 1951).

understandings of reading from the late-nineteenth century.¹¹⁵ As Hilliard has demonstrated, the class-based division between ‘middlebrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ books and reading habits is in reality unhelpful for understanding the porous, changeable nature of books and how and by whom they were engaged with.¹¹⁶ However, A&U’s readers leaned into these anxieties about the cultural implications of different types of literature to attempt to mediate the audience advice books would be aimed at. Marking out the ‘right’ class of audience for a book on sex was another way of reinforcing its image as respectable. Underpinning the imagination of these audiences is a tension between providing middle-class readers with access to sexual knowledges whilst being cautious as to not offend their sensibilities, as Macalister Brew believed was possible.

‘...it might have been written in 1890’: Age, Gender, and Generation

Aside from class-based understandings of the desired audience for books on sex, the intersections of age, gender, and generational notions of sexual change were significant for the ways in which report writers theorised the perceived audience for advice literature. Chesser believed Corner’s *Attaining Manhood* and *Attaining Womanhood* would be fitting for ‘all teenagers and that large number of shy adults with little, if any, knowledge of some of the physical aspects of life. It should be of particular interest to parents who wish to give their young children something to read, and who also wish to gain the knowledge for themselves and so help them in the up-bringing of their children.’¹¹⁷ Evelyn Unwin understood the purpose of Corner’s *Attaining Womanhood* similarly to Chesser: ‘Dr. Corner intends his book to provide

¹¹⁵ Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914* (Aldershot, 2006), pp.1-10, 23-27.

¹¹⁶ Hilliard, ‘The Twopenny Library’, pp.199-220.

¹¹⁷ AURR 20/1/76, Eustace Chesser on *Attaining Womanhood* and *Attaining Manhood* by George W. Corner (21 April 1952).

intelligent girls from 12 to 16 with a scientific account of sex and human reproduction, and he assumes that it will not be an introduction to the subject [...].'¹¹⁸ Whilst citing a more narrow audience in her comments on just one of Corner's two companion books, Unwin again introduced the idea of varying levels of intelligence and ability shaping the suitability of audience, whilst further moderating this with a focus on age. Corner himself wrote that *Attaining Womanhood* was intended for secondary school age girls, whilst being useful for the parents of younger girls too.¹¹⁹ In a more negative review of a different book, Chesser had noted that Pilkington's *Love Lies Ahead* would cause 'an unnecessary sense of guilt with regard to his sexual expression' for the 'younger reader'.¹²⁰

From the early-twentieth century, there was considerable concern about the impacts of sexual knowledge on young people amongst the general population. Hera Cook's study of the backlash from mothers against the introduction of a 'sex instruction' course in a Dronfield school has shown how some feared the corrupting influence of sexual knowledge on young women in particular.¹²¹ Fisher has also examined resistance to changes in sexual education and practices in her oral history of birth control, where she states women often 'sought to preserve themselves in a state of naivety and passivity'.¹²² However, as early as the 1870s, women especially understood the negative impacts of sexual ignorance on young people later in life, as illustrated by the expressions of regret and desire for education for future generations expressed in the

¹¹⁸ AURR 20/1/75, Evelyn Unwin on *Attaining Womanhood* by George W. Corner (25 March 1952).

¹¹⁹ Corner, *Attaining Womanhood* (1953), pp. vii-viii.

¹²⁰ AURR 22/2/12, Eustace Chesser on *Love Lies Ahead* by Roger Pilkington (22 June 1954).

¹²¹ Hera Cook, 'Emotion bodies, sexuality, and sex education in Edwardian England', *The Historical Journal*, 55:2 (2012), pp.475-495.

¹²² Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford, 2006), p.5.

Women's Co-operative Guild letters written by working-class mothers.¹²³ Some of those writing advice books clearly shared similar views of the value of sex education for the young, aiming books specifically at this demographic. In doing so, they had to compete with resistance to the expansion of access to sexual knowledges into younger age groups, and thus we see the difficulties faced when attempting to identify the suitable ways of communicating this knowledge.

Comments on the age of an appropriate audience also intersected with understandings of the relationship between generation and gender roles in the 1950s Dr Enid Charles—a British socialist, feminist, and statistician—alternatively commented that Corner's *Attaining Womanhood* would 'not cut much ice with the more thoughtful of the younger generation unless it takes into account the changing economic and social position of women as wives and home-makers.'¹²⁴ In another example, Chesser noted that 'females who have a sense of grievance as a result of living in a masculine-dominated world will find nothing here to soothe them' in relation to Pilkington's *Love Lies Ahead*.¹²⁵ In both these examples, the reviewers were attentive to the cultural significance of post-war shifts in gendered roles, and how they might impact the content of books that would resonate with female readers. Marking the generational shift in understandings of gender equality, Charles also highlighted the intersections of age and gender in producing advice appropriate for the intended audience.

¹²³ Margaret Llewelyn Davies, (ed), *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (London, 1978), p.7.

¹²⁴ AURR 8/1/40, Enid Charles on *Attaining Womanhood* by George W. Corner (undated). On Enid Charles, see Sylvia Wargon, 'Legacy of Enid Charles, 1894-1972', *Canadian Studies in Population*, 32:2 (2005), pp.137-153; Diana Wyndham, *Norman Haire and the Study of Sex* (Sydney, 2012), p.227.

¹²⁵ AURR 22/2/12, Eustace Chesser on *Love Lies Ahead* by Roger Pilkington (22 June 1954).

The shifting gender roles of 1950s Britain are well-documented by historians, and as such a significant theme of the post-war years, it is unsurprising that Charles and Chesser would include gendered experience and understandings of women's social positions in their considerations of audience reaction to new books on sex.¹²⁶ Stephanie Spencer has argued that girls and women were understood in broader advice literature in this decade in 'homogenous' terms, as 'destined for early marriage and motherhood', with emphasis placed on the gendered nature of their education and the types of skills and work they should be learning.¹²⁷ Charles and Chesser's commentaries are suggestive of the ways in which women's roles were understood to be within the home and family, yet they also hint towards the difficulties and dissonances faced by women in the context of their domestic and sexual relationships. Through their attentiveness to the broader social context, the expert reviewers moulded the imagined woman reader and their experience of sexual and relational life. Constructing the reader's problems—from frustration at the masculine-dominated world to sexual ignorance and feelings of guilt over sexual expression—alongside their identities allowed publishers' expert readers to help carve out a space for sexual knowledges in print that was targeted and could justify its purpose for its audience.

This gestures towards how reader's reports drew temporal boundaries around sexual knowledges too. Specialist readers often judged the value of a manuscript on its relevance and modernity at the moment in which they were reviewing it. Those with claims to expertise on

¹²⁶ See Stephanie Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s* (Basingstoke, 2005); Angela Davis and Laura King, 'Gendered Perspectives on Men's Changing Familial Roles in Postwar England, c. 1950-1990', *Gender & History*, 30:1 (2018), pp.70-92; Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Vernacular Discourses of Gender Equality in the Post-War British Working Class', *Past & Present*, 254:1 (2022), pp.277-313.

¹²⁷ Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s* (Basingstoke, 2005), p.78.

sex attempted to ascertain the value of proposed publications based on a teleology of sexual culture that relied upon a linear narrative of progress from repressive Victorian sexuality to a sexually liberated modernity. For example, on Pilkington's *Love Lies Ahead*, Chessser wrote that 'One feels as if one had suddenly been transported into the Victorian era where Love and Romance in capital letters was very much in vogue.'¹²⁸ Chessser's critique relied on stereotypes of Victorian sexuality, which, as Michael Mason has argued, held Victorians as prude and puritanical with little recognition of the nuances of past sexual moralism, something that has endured into the present day.¹²⁹ Enid Charles made a similar remark about Corner's *Attaining Womanhood*: 'My criticism of his approach is that it might have been written in 1890.' As a statistician interested in population, she believed Corner was inattentive to changes in family size, the number of childless women, and the shifting relationship between the sexes as well as the separation of sex and reproduction.¹³⁰ Specifying the ways in which Corner had failed to account for social changes of the period, Charles located his approach as the product of not only a different national context as an American manuscript, but a different era altogether.

Collins's claim that 'Victorian' sexual repression became an explicit opposition to 'modern' sexuality and marriage in the twentieth century is borne out here.¹³¹ In drawing on the mythology of Victorian repression, these readers attempted to define what modern sexual advice was, and thus gatekeep the ways in which developing sexual knowledges were communicated in popular books in the post-war period. These narratives of progress in the realm of sexual knowledge and practices demonstrate the overly simplistic view of shifts in

¹²⁸ AURR 22/2/12, Eustace Chessser on *Love Lies Ahead* by Roger Pilkington (22 June 1954).

¹²⁹ Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford, 1994), pp.1-35.

¹³⁰ AURR 8/1/40, Enid Charles on *Attaining Womanhood* by George W. Corner (undated).

¹³¹ Collins, *Modern Love*, p.5.

sexual culture across the twentieth century that scholarship by Adrian Bingham and Frank Mort have described.¹³² Mort has more recently summarised arguments about the post-1945 period as a watershed moment for the separation of Victorian sexual mores from ‘modern’ understandings of sexuality; he argued that ‘Victorianism’ had a long reach into the 1960s and beyond, its complex influence lacking recognition by the story of sexual ‘enlightenment’.¹³³ Attempts by sex experts to reject Victorian approaches to sexual knowledge illustrate, in Mort’s words, the ‘afterlives’ of nineteenth-century sexual culture, first because reviewers used this concept to discredit the work of others, but second, because the work inspired comparisons to Victorianism in the first place. As Fisher has argued, the conceptualisation of sex as ‘requiring a journey out of ignorance derives from a distinctively modern understanding’—the emphasis on modern, enlightened sexual knowledge only makes sense if placed in contrast to something ‘premodern’, in this case, Victorian sexual mores.¹³⁴ Thus not only has this teleology posed a problem for nuanced understandings of the development of sexual culture from our present standpoint, but as it was in the process of being solidified in the twentieth century, it became a tool through which those with claims to sexual expertise tried to shape and direct the constitution of sexual knowledge in popular cultural forms itself.

¹³² Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers?: Sex, private life and the British popular press, 1918-1978* (Oxford, 2009), pp.12-14; Mort, ‘Striptease’, pp.29-53; Frank Mort, ‘The Ben Pimlott Memorial Lecture 2010: The Permissive Society Revisited’, *Twentieth-Century British History*, 22:2 (2011), pp.269-298.

¹³³ Frank Mort, ‘Victorian Afterlives: Sexuality and identity in the 1960s and 1970s’, *History Workshop Journal*, 82:1 (2016), pp.199-212.

¹³⁴ Fisher, ‘Modern Ignorance’, pp.471-472.

‘...not suitable for English readers’: Sex and Nationality

Finally, the intended reader was geographically bound in the imagination of the report writer too. An especially dominant theme in reports was the implication that sexual knowledge was defined by geographical location and relevant only on the basis of nationally specific understandings of sex. In many reader’s reports, comparisons were made based on the appropriateness of a book originally printed or written in the United States for English readers. For instance, Chesser claimed von Urban’s book would need to be edited ‘in keeping with the English reading public’, whilst he could not see Fromme’s manuscript ‘being put over in this country’ despite it being suitable for the ‘American reading public’.¹³⁵ Chesser also believed that Corner’s *Attaining Womanhood* and *Attaining Manhood* ‘could be re-written for the English market’, something which Chesser was happy to offer suggestions on should A&U have wished.¹³⁶ Similarly, he wrote that American author Ruth Herschberger’s collection of feminist essays on female sexuality, *Adam’s Rib*, contained too many ‘Americanisms’ but would be ‘well-worth the gamble’ to publish in Britain.¹³⁷

The perceived depth of national differences in sexual attitudes and behaviours were even more pronounced in comments on Corner’s inclusion of Alfred Kinsey’s report on human sexuality

¹³⁵ AURR 18/3/41, Eustace Chesser on *Sex Perfection and Marital Happiness* by Rudolf von Urban (17 April 1950); AURR 19/3/39, Eustace Chesser on *A Psychologist Looks at Sex and Marriage* by Allan Fromme (29 January 1951).

¹³⁶ AURR 20/1/76, Eustace Chesser on *Attaining Womanhood* and *Attaining Manhood* by George W. Corner (21 April 1952).

¹³⁷ AURR 19/2/04, Eustace Chesser on *Adam’s Rib* by Ruth Herschberger (15 October 1951). For the book referenced, see Josephine Langstaff, *Adam’s Rib* (London, 1954). A&U’s reader’s reports named the author of *Adam’s Rib* as Ruth Herschberger, but it was actually published in 1954 under the author’s pseudonym, Josephine Langstaff. For consistency with the archive material, I have opted to use the former name.

(the first of which was published in 1948) in his companion advice books.¹³⁸ Eleanor French warned A&U that there would be a significant adverse reaction amongst British readers to any inclusion of Kinsey: ‘Chapter 8 in both books is not suitable for English readers. [...] the mere mention of Kinsey in a book of this kind would scare parents stiff. Also his reference to work being done in America would seem so remote to the English child as to make it entirely redundant.’¹³⁹ Not only does French isolate American sexuality as the distant, unknown ‘other’ in this scenario, but she describes the shock any discussion of such a removed sexual culture would give to English parents reading it.

French’s comments here were congruent with the wider academic and popular reception of the Kinsey Reports in Britain at this time. For instance, Dagmar Herzog has explained how the Kinsey Reports were met with intense sensationalism and scrutiny in American print media, whilst in Britain, the press tended to ‘evince a kind of moralistic sensationalism’ alluding to the gap between British and American sexuality, and characterising Britons as ‘still far more sexually conservative’ than their American counterparts.¹⁴⁰ Bingham has partially problematised this narrative. Whilst agreeing that the impact of Kinsey’s first report was ‘modest’ in Britain, he demonstrated that by the 1950s, interest in the reports was increasing, pushed by newspapers such as the *Sunday Pictorial*, and impetus was found to commission the so-called ‘Little Kinsey’ survey by social investigators Mass-Observation in 1949.¹⁴¹ Whilst an

¹³⁸ Vern L. Bullough, ‘Alfred Kinsey and the Kinsey Report: Historical Overview and Lasting Contributions’, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 35:2 (1998), pp.127-131.

¹³⁹ AURR 20/1/78, Eleanor French on *Attaining Womanhood* and *Attaining Manhood* by George W. Corner (21 April 1952).

¹⁴⁰ Dagmar Herzog, ‘The Reception of the Kinsey Reports in Europe’, *Sexuality & Culture*, 10:1 (2006), pp.39-40.

¹⁴¹ Adrian Bingham, ‘The “K-Bomb”: Social Surveys, the Popular Press, and British Sexual Culture in the 1940s and 1950s’, *Journal of British Studies*, 50:1 (2011), pp.160-168. On ‘Little

increasing curiosity about sexual life in general—and American sexual life in particular—was developing in Britain, British sexuality and behaviour was still seen as distinct, more conservative, and of superior moral standing, offering some explanation for French’s warnings to A&U.

Concerns with the viability of sexual advice across different national contexts continued into the 1960s too, as evidenced by debates over Wright’s *Sex and Society*. For example, whilst a Swedish publisher picked up Wright’s typescript for translation, her typescript was rejected by two prospective American publishers. Philip Unwin suggested a reason for this: because it was ‘rather too British in its outlook (as indeed one always thought would be the case). To be quite frank, I am doubtful whether we shall succeed in getting an American publisher to print his own edition [...].’¹⁴² Despite receiving some interest in exports for the United States market of the A&U edition, the apprehensiveness over whether the book could be published separately in America is indicative of the perceived national specific differences in how sex should be discussed. Selling rights for reprinting abroad was one of the most lucrative ways to export British literature across the twentieth century, however, Stanley Unwin’s claim that there was a ‘ceaseless flow’ of British books through the sale of rights, partially printed, and fully printed editions obscures the complexities of reproducing books on sex for different national contexts.¹⁴³

Kinsey’, see Liz Stanley, *Sex Surveyed, 1949-1994: From Mass-Observation’s ‘Little Kinsey’ to the National Survey and the Hite Reports* (Oxfordshire, 1995).

¹⁴² Weybright & Talley and Harper, both rejected *Sex and Society*. AUC 1227/14, letter from Philip Unwin to Helena Wright (18 March 1968).

¹⁴³ Stanley Unwin, ‘English Books Abroad’ in John Hampden, (ed), *The Book World: A New Survey* (London, 1935), pp.176-177.

This incident therefore illustrates the flip side of Chesser's earlier reports; just as books that were 'too American' had to be edited for an English audience, those that were 'too British' needed to be moulded for the American reader. Since the 1930s, Stanley Unwin had singled out the United States as the 'most important' market beyond Britain for books because of its high population of English-speakers.¹⁴⁴ However, in an American market that posed distinct challenges—of a more limited readership and dominating interest in paperback best-sellers—for commercialised book circulation of 'serious' non-fiction in the post-war period, publishing books about sex that felt mismatched to the American market was a commercial gamble.¹⁴⁵ As Peter Mandler has noted, 'American readers were very keen to acquire explicit sexual knowledge', and titles sold across both national contexts were regularly reframed and edited to appeal to these cultural differences.¹⁴⁶

Navigating these cultural differences was thus a core feature of making sex advice books marketable beyond Britain, driven by the desires of both publishers and authors to achieve commercial success. Conceptualisations of sex and sexual behaviours as being nationally specific has been established further by Ruby Ray Daily's recent work on the reception of Kinsey's research in Britain in the 1950s. Daily argued that through questioning the relationship between sexuality, selfhood, and nationality in British-authored letters to Kinsey, we can ascertain that the British 'way of speaking about sexuality and sex' was 'very idiosyncratic', reliant on a much more 'eager, but impersonal' approach to sex than in the United States.¹⁴⁷ The significance of this is even more apparent when placed in the context of Benedict Anderson's

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, pp.163-177.

¹⁴⁵ Mandler, 'Good Reading for the Million, pp.243-244, 267-268.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, pp.257-258.

¹⁴⁷ Ruby Ray Daily, "Dear Dr K': Mobility, Sex, and Selfhood in Alfred Kinsey's British World Correspondence, 1948-58', *Twentieth Century British History*, 32:1 (2021), p.29.

assertion that print culture was crucial in establishing group identity, partially forming the cultural basis of nation and national identity.¹⁴⁸ As sex had become an increasingly important part of understandings of the self, discussions of sex in print culture spoke to the collective identity of the nation; where sexual mores differed, so too did the content of advice literature. Cultural differences in this context thus marked a sticking point for sex experts and publishers, who had to consider whether their book fit the norms and assumptions of markets different to their country of origin.

Thus these exchanges are evidence of the practical and commercial considerations made in relation to readership during the editorial process in the post-war years that constrained both what authors were able to produce, and where their books could be circulated. Publishers, like Unwin, were the deciding factor in this process of navigating different markets on a national and international scale; as those with the market knowledge, they mediated and moulded the circulation of sexual knowledges in this way. The imagining of audiences—both in terms of who readers were and the practical possibilities of circulating books on sex—as a fundamental component of the production of advice literature is therefore visible through attention to both reader’s reports and publisher correspondence from the 1950s and 1960s.

Conclusion

Based on the rise of ‘sexpertise’ in twentieth-century Britain, this chapter has demonstrated how expertise was both an important source of legitimacy for publishers and authors producing

¹⁴⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London, 2016), p.31.

books on sex, and an identity that could not be taken for granted to secure the respectability of such books. The position of sex advice literature as a legitimate source of sexual knowledge was hard-won through a series of complex publishing and authorial decisions that ultimately shaped and informed the content and style of these texts. Whilst recent work by Jones, for instance, has documented the shifting importance of scientific and professional expertise as replaced by an emphasis on personal experience into the 1960s, the process revealed in correspondence and reader's reports is a complex and disjointed one, which hints towards the unstable position of 'sexpertise' over a longer period from the interwar years onwards.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, deploying expertise to secure the legitimacy of an advice book not only rested on asserting one's own authority, but on actively gatekeeping the production of sexual knowledges and sometimes discrediting the expertise of others too.

The audience an advice book was intended for was important, and within the publication process, the 'imagined' audience or readership as a tool to shape the content and circulation of these books is evident in reader's reports. Taking intersecting identities of class, gender, age, and generation publishers' readers painted a portrait of who would read a particular book on sex, and how it would affect them. These imaginings reveal the cultural context in which publishers, authors, and those who gave expert opinions were working. Anxieties about Britain's class structure, changing gender roles in the post-war world, and the impact of sexual knowledges on young people in particular were central to marking the boundaries of advice literature readership. The boundaries of the publishers' and author's imagined audiences are reinforced through examining the global reach of the British book industry in the twentieth century, as it presented problems for publishers in translating sexual knowledges and advice

¹⁴⁹ Jones, '(S)expertise', p.2.

between different national contexts. The perceived national specificity of sexual attitudes and behaviours was a defining feature of how reader's assessed the relevance and viability of publishing a book. A divide between American and English sexuality was a particular sticking point within the knowledge production and book publication process.

In broader terms, this chapter has also contributed to two important historiographical debates that define how sexual culture has been understood. First, building on the work of Chapter One, it has highlighted the shortcomings of the 'popularisation' model of knowledge production, explaining instead how, in the context of advice books, the creation of sexual knowledges was conversational and iterative. My argument that sexual knowledges in popular advice books were co-produced through interactions between different actors with levels and realms of expertise complicates understandings of advice literature that have rendered the process of knowledge production and dissemination as hierarchical and top-down. By opening up the publishing process through examining reader's reports and correspondence, especially in the case of Wright's two publications with A&U in 1930 and 1968, the complexities of knowledge production over a longer timeframe are revealed. Second, through correspondence and reader's reports from the 1950s and 1960s, it has revealed that a neat teleology of Victorian repression to sexual liberation in the context of advice books fail to account for the persistence of concerns and anxieties around readership, respectability, and sexual mores into the post-war period. Overall, this chapter has illustrated that reader's reports are an underutilised yet extremely rich source for tracing not only which types of sexual knowledges were communicated in advice literature, but *how* they were communicated too.

CHAPTER THREE

**CONDITIONS OF ACCESS TO ADVICE LITERATURE IN TWENTIETH-
CENTURY BRITAIN**

Circulating Advice Literature

In 1936, publisher George Allen & Unwin (A&U) told Australian sexologist Dr Norman Haire that they were ‘taking immediate steps’ to ensure his recently released book, *Birth Control Methods: Contraception, Abortion, Sterilization*, would ‘appear in the display with the other titles at Selfridges.’ They also informed him that ‘Harrods ordered a further 6 copies a few days ago [...]’. Selfridges already had stock of the book, but needed more copies for display as people were picking up the book so often without buying it that it was becoming damaged and had to be hidden behind the counter. It was also in demand at Harrods, indicated by their order of more copies, though the letter reveals less about its presence there.¹ In two major department stores located in the busy shopping areas of London’s West End and Knightsbridge respectively, members of the public were able to browse or purchase a new, popular birth control tract by a leading sexologist. Just two months prior, A&U had informed Haire that popular bookshop W.H. Smith & Son would not ‘stock or display’ *Birth Control Methods*, regardless of his status as a medical professional.² Although this correspondence has been briefly included in some academic literature, the historiography to date has done little to unpick the wider context and

¹ University of Reading Special Collections, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Papers, Correspondence (henceforth: AUC) 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (18 July 1936); Norman Haire, *Birth Control Methods: Contraception, Abortion, Sterilization* (London, 1936).

² AUC 48/11, letter from Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (25 May 1936).

significance of the supply of such advice books in prominent department stores and popular booksellers in the twentieth century.³

In contrast to the hostility of W.H. Smith's to Haire's book, other institutions were enthusiastic to encourage access to advice literature. By 1937, for instance, blind readers could choose from a small range of sex instruction books to borrow from the National Library for the Blind's (NLB) catalogue of braille volumes, including Marie Stopes's *Married Love* (1918).⁴ Into the early-1950s this collection had expanded to include Helena Wright's *The Sex Factor in Marriage* (1930), also published by A&U, amongst other books.⁵ Efforts to supply advice literature through the Library had begun in 1924, when the then Secretary and Librarian of the London branch had requested permission to produce braille copies of Stopes's famous publication.⁶ Even more obviously than with the A&U correspondence, the supply of advice literature through the NLB has gone completely unexplored despite some recent important academic interventions theorising the experience of visual impairment and also associated reading technologies.⁷

³ Diana Wyndham, *Norman Haire and the Study of Sex* (Sydney, 2012), p.289.

⁴ British Library (henceforth: BL), W24-9611, National Library for the Blind (henceforth: NLB), *Catalogue of Books* (1937), p.89; Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties*, eighteenth edition (London, 1926).

⁵ BL, 11919.bb.24, NLB, *Catalogue of Books, Part II: Non-Fiction and Foreign* (London, 1952), pp.94-96; Helena Wright, *The Sex Factor in Marriage: A book for those who are about to be married*, third edition (London, 1945).

⁶ Penguin Random House, Marie Stopes Author Files (henceforth: PRH MS), letter from Constance Bellhouse, National Library for the Blind (henceforth: NLB), to G.P. Putnam's Sons Ltd. (12 August 1924). With thanks to archivist Catherine Flynn for locating and sharing these papers with me, and to the Galton Institute, which holds Marie Stopes's copyrights, for permission to access them.

⁷ For example: Mark Paterson, *Seeing with the Hands: Blindness, Vision and Touch After Descartes* (Edinburgh, 2020); Heather Tilly, *Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gisting* (Cambridge, 2017); Matthew Rubery, 'From shell shock to shellac: the Great War, blindness, and Britain's talking book library', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26:1 (2015), pp.1-25; Matthew Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

Together, these examples capture a few of the scattered settings in and through which the British public was inconsistently able—or not—to access advice texts containing evolving ideas about sex, bodies, and desires. They raise questions about who had access to sex instruction books, where, how this access was experienced, and what this meant in the cultural context of Britain in the interwar and immediate post-war decade. Questions of access have pervaded scholarship on sexual, marital, and contraceptive advice since Roy Porter and Lesley Hall’s pathbreaking survey almost thirty years ago.⁸ However, as Doan has argued, because of the prominence of the hierarchical ‘popularisation’ model of the circulation of sexological information, the process of advice literature actually reaching and being encountered by the public has ‘eluded scrutiny’.⁹

Taking the limitations of the current historiography as a starting point, then, this chapter’s focus is on the spaces, modes, and experiences of access to advice literature in Britain in the interwar period up to the 1950s. This draws on a number of interventions on reading and book circulation. For instance, Mary Hammond’s contention that ‘what it meant—socially and ideologically—to buy, borrow, read or display a particular book in a particular context’ is important for examining the development of reading habits calls attention to both the practical questions of access and the meanings underlying them.¹⁰ Additionally, Lucy Delap and Margaretta Jolly’s work has suggested that through paying attention to where books were

⁸ Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven, 1995), p.248.

⁹ Laura Doan, ‘Troubling Popularisation: On the Gendered Circuits of a ‘Scientific’ Knowledge of Sex’, *Gender & History*, 31:2 (2019), p.308.

¹⁰ Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914* (Aldershot, 2006), p.11.

encountered broadens the boundaries of our understanding of knowledge circulation.¹¹ It also turns to sensory histories to flesh out how access was experienced to further nuance the process of knowledge circulation. Sasha Rasmussen's encouragement that to foreground sensory experience is to 'think ourselves back into the body' and grapple with questions of 'embodied identity' is significant here, as it has urged me to think more deeply about *why* encounters with advice literature were meaningful in particular contexts, and how this meaning is preserved—or not—in the archival record.¹² This chapter therefore asks what we can gain in our understanding of the development of popular sexual culture if we deconstruct the notion of access, and take seriously the spaces and bodies in and through which this access was facilitated and experienced.

Chapter Three therefore uses two case studies of access—retail spaces including department stores in London, W.H. Smith's bookshops across England, and the NLB as part of the British public library service—to push back against a lack of specificity in the current historiography as to the modes and experiences of access to advice literature. In the first part, I trace the availability of sexual, marital, and contraceptive advice literature in the retail settings of Selfridges and Harrods department stores and W.H. Smith's bookshops to demonstrate that these texts were available in much more pervasive, public ways than has previously been recognised. Taking a consciously spatial and material approach to book circulation, I explore

¹¹ Lucy Delap, 'Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974-2000', *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), pp.171, 191; Margaretta Jolly, 'Recognising Place, Space and Nation in Researching Women's Movements: Sisterhood and After', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 35 (2012), pp.144-146.

¹² Sasha Rasmussen, 'What it feels like for a girl: Gendering the history of the senses', *History: The Official Journal of the Historical Association* (10 February 2021). Available at: <https://historyjournal.org.uk/2021/02/10/what-it-feels-like-for-a-girl-gendering-the-history-of-the-senses/> (Accessed: 13 May 2022).

the physicality of access through the built retail environment. Developing this and taking inspiration from recent advances in histories of sensory experience, I examine the phenomenology of access, asking what it felt like in an embodied and emotional sense to encounter sexual knowledges in these particular public settings. In doing so, I deconstruct what these moments of encounter meant individually and culturally. This section will predominantly focus on department stores and bookshops in London, a geographical limitation imposed by the archive material available, but there are small indications—especially in relation to W.H. Smith’s bookshops—that access to advice literature was more widespread if regionally varied.

In the second part, I use the case study of the NLB’s supply of marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice literature to examine the role of mediating institutions in the circulation of advice, whilst drawing out the relationship between print culture, sex, and disability in interwar and post-war Britain. First, I establish who would have accessed advice books through the NLB and which texts exactly were supplied; as the history of the NLB’s relationship to British sexual culture has not been included at all in historical scholarship so far, the contextualisation of this case study is extremely important. Following this, I examine the intersections of reader agency, respectability, eugenics, and sexual self-help to elaborate my argument that the ‘popularisation’ model does not account for the nuances of how advice was circulated and accessed. The NLB’s supply of advice literature was, in many ways, typical of the broader public library system at the time, yet popular cultural understandings of blindness, disability, sex, and eugenics reveal the specificity of encounters with sexual knowledge as mediated through different bodies in this context. This is highlighted through exploring the sensory experience of access to sexual knowledges in the NLB and through braille books, writing the experiences of blind readers into the history of advice culture, which has largely excluded disabled people’s experiences thus far.

Overall, this chapter argues that advice books—and therefore sexual knowledges—occupied a cultural ‘grey zone’ in interwar and post-war Britain, whereby they were simultaneously private and public, respectable and salacious. The sources explored in this chapter have enabled me to locate this ‘grey zone’ spatially and geographically in a range of department stores, bookshops, and libraries. At times, they elucidate the specificities of where and how sexual knowledges were (or were not) displayed on shelves and counters within these locations. This draws on work by Sarah Bull, Anna Clark, and Peter Bailey that has elucidated the ambiguity of sexual knowledges, behaviours, and practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹³ The liminality and ephemeral nature of many encounters with advice books reflected the fleeting, often ambiguous position of these texts within both spaces and places of encounter, and Britain’s evolving sexual culture across this period.

‘Two discreet shelves for the classics and Marie Stopes’

‘In reply to your ‘phone [*sic*] call yesterday, we are taking immediate steps to see that your book will appear in the display with the other titles at Selfridges.’¹⁴ A&U’s reassurance on the displaying of *Birth Control Methods* hints towards a wider supply of sex instruction books in Selfridges. It is unclear whether the publisher was referring to other advice books, A&U publications, or other books generally. However, it is likely that *Birth Control Methods* was not the sole marital, sexual, or contraceptive advice text displayed or sold in the store. Before

¹³ Anna Clark, ‘Twilight moments’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14:1-2 (2005), pp.139-160; Sarah Bull, ‘Obscenity and the publication of sexual science in Britain, 1810-1914’, PhD thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2014, pp.iii, 1-3; Peter Bailey, ‘Parasexuality and Glamour: the Victorian Barmaid as Cultural Prototype’, *Gender & History*, 2:2 (1990), pp.148-172.

¹⁴ AUC 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (18 July 1936).

exploring the material and sensory conditions of access to these books, I contextualise my arguments with which advice texts were available in department stores and bookshops in the 1930s and the surrounding decades. I argue that, whilst Porter and Hall have posited that most books about sex had to be obtained from ‘insalubrious sources’ even as more became available through ‘reputable publishers, for sale in respectable bookshops rather than backstreet rubber-goods shops’ into the 1930s, not enough emphasis has been placed on the specificities of which texts were available, where, and to whom.¹⁵

Contemporary fiction supports the suggestion that Haire’s *Birth Control Methods* was one of a small number of books about sex available in Selfridges. Jane Oliver and Ann Stafford’s novel *Business As Usual* (1933) tells the story of a young woman, Hilary Fane, who becomes a clerk and then librarian at Everyman’s department store, a thinly veiled fictional Selfridges.¹⁶ In a letter to her fiancée, she described the books sold in the shop including ‘two discreet shelves for the classics and Marie Stopes.’¹⁷ Stocked alongside classic novels, whilst not specifying which texts, this fictional description implies that advice literature was not an unusual feature in a 1930s London department store. The ‘discreet’ nature of the shelves for Stopes’s books in the novel stands in contrast with the emphasis on displayed books in A&U’s correspondence, but together this suggests that advice texts likely appeared in multiple ways in Selfridges. Moreover, whilst in her library clerk position, Hilary pens an apology letter to an unhappy school headmistress threatening to withdraw her library subscription after receiving a book

¹⁵ Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven, 1995), pp.259, 261.

¹⁶ Jane Oliver and Ann Stafford, *Business As Usual*, first published 1933 (Bath, 2020). Jane Oliver and Ann Stafford were the pen names Helen Christina Easson Rees (née Evans) and Anne Isabel Stafford Pedler respectively: Kate Maconald, ‘Introduction’ in Jane Oliver and Ann Stafford, *Business As Usual*, first published 1933 (Bath 2020), p.vii.

¹⁷ Oliver and Stafford, *Business As Usual*, p.92.

unsuitable for young women that would ‘undermine the morals of the country’. Hilary’s apology reassures the headmistress that her school’s folder was marked with ‘CAUTION — SCHOOL, EXCLUSIVE: NON-Fiction (No Sex)’.¹⁸ This incident creates a comedic moment around a school being erroneously supplied a book about sex in a consignment from the department store library. It implies that books of this nature were readily available to be borrowed by library subscribers at Everyman’s, whilst shoppers were able to buy Stopes’s works in the bookshop. Although fictional, the descriptions and events in *Business As Usual* rendered Selfridges as a space through which advice literature was accessible.

The context *Business as Usual* was written in gives these claims weight. The bookshop and library of Everyman’s were based on features of Selfridges, which contained both a bookshop and lending library amongst its many attractions, making books a major feature of its stock.¹⁹ The novel was well-received by the founder of Selfridges, Harry Gordon Selfridge, and in 1933, it was available for purchase in the shop as part of the selection of signed copies in the book department.²⁰ Furthermore, in 1927, Selfridge agreed to donate a considerable sum of one-hundred guineas to Stopes for the expenses of a caravan. Caravans were to be used as travelling birth control clinics originally proposed to visit ‘a town a week’ by the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress (CDC), although Selfridge was hesitant about his support being public knowledge: ‘[...] it is probably best not to let that fact be published, and I am afraid I shall be unable to act as one of the Vice-Presidents of the good work.’²¹ Despite this, his

¹⁸ Ibid, pp.74-75. Emphasis original.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Outka, ‘Crossing the Great Divides: Selfridges, Modernity, and the Commodified Authentic’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 12:2 (2005), pp.312, 324.

²⁰ Macdonald, 'Introduction', pp.xi, xiii.

²¹ BL, Marie Stopes Papers (henceforth: MS) MS 58621, Caravan Clinics, Vol. CLXXV (ff.281), 1926-1929, f.10, letter from Harry Gordon Selfridge to Marie Stopes (24 February 1927); f.34, cutting from *Sunday Chronicle*, undated.

endorsement of the novel and covert support of Stopes's birth control clinics suggests that the inclusion of sex instruction books in its stock was likely accurate. Likewise, Harrods had a book department that was supplied with copies of *Birth Control Methods*.²² There are other examples of advice books being sold in Harrods, such as Eustace Chesser's *Love Without Fear* (1940), which was sold at a relatively high price making it inaccessible to many. Little has been made of the significance of this in academic work, however.²³ In this context, it is feasible that both Selfridges and Harrods supplied more advice titles than just Haire's *Birth Control Methods*, and thus the exchange between Unwin and Haire is representative of the wider availability of sex instruction books in and through the department store bookshop and library.

There is substantive evidence in the Mass-Observation (MO) archive of books about sex—within and beyond the advice genre—being made available through bookshops from the 1930s onwards, contingent with Porter and Hall's claim that 'respectable bookshops' became a more common point of access.²⁴ For example, in a series of observations at bookshops on Charing Cross Road, London, in 1941, a bookseller at the International Bookshop told the observer that 'The sex stuff has gone up to [sic]...no, not pornographic [sic], but the Encyclopedia [sic] of Sex and that sort of thing', whilst the observer saw a range of 'high brow' books at Zwemmers bookshop, including texts about sex by authors such as sexologist Havelock Ellis.²⁵ As a literary hub, Charing Cross Road was home to a range of generalist bookshops as well as specialist

²² AUC 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (18 July 1936).

²³ Alec Craig, 'Recent Developments in the Law of Obscene Libel' in A.P. Pillay and Albert Ellis, (eds), *Sex, Society and the Individual: Selected Papers, Revised and Brought Up To Date, from 'Marriage Hygiene' and 'International Journal of Sexology'* (Bombay, 1953), p.312; Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p.262.

²⁴ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p.261.

²⁵ Mass-Observation Online Archive (henceforth: MOA), Topic Collection (henceforth: TC) Reading Habits 1937-1947, 20-3-B Newsagents & Bookshops, Report on Bookshops, 'Charing X Rd.', 'International Bookshop' and 'Zwemmers' (18 February 1941).

booksellers trading books about sex.²⁶ There, an observer recorded two young women looking at a Penguin book on venereal disease in 1943: ‘One of them moves away and picks up a Penguins [sic]. She beckons to the other. The title of the Penguin is “Venereal diseases in Britain” by Sydney M. Laird.’²⁷ Penguin published cheap paperbacks from 1935, initially as an imprint of The Bodley Head, that were sold through high-street shops intended to bring fiction and non-fiction books to a mass market at an affordable price, or as Stuart Kells has described, a ‘poor man’s university’.²⁸ Thus these observations demonstrate the relative availability of books about sex and bodies through a range of specialist and generalist bookshops in London by the 1940s, building on the impression of where these books were accessible beyond the 1930s department store.

Importantly, the locations revealed here are in mainstream, high-footfall areas of London. Whilst Porter and Hall’s recognition that books on sex became available in more ‘reputable’ bookshops from the 1930s, their emphasis on the salacious, ‘backstreet’ stores as the predominant location of access has obscured the prominence of advice books in other settings.²⁹ In the context of Selfridges, the reasons for the display and sale of such books despite the social and cultural taboos surrounding the discussion of sex can be inferred. Selfridge wished to

²⁶ Roberta Gray, ‘The street that’s made of books’, *The Irish Times* (15 September 2001). Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/the-street-that-s-made-of-books-1.327414> (Accessed: 6 July 2023); Lucy Delap, ‘Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women’s Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974-2000’, *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), p.188.

²⁷ MOA, TC Reading Habits 1937-1947, 20-8-D Reading Observations, Foyles Charing Cross Rd. (22 June 1943).

²⁸ Stuart Kells, *Penguin and the Lane Brothers: The Untold Story of a Publishing Revolution* (Collingwood, 2015), pp.ix-x; Peter Mandler, ‘Good Reading for the Million: The ‘Paperback Revolution’ and the Co-Production of Academic Knowledge in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain and America’, *Past & Present*, 244 (2019), pp.235-246.

²⁹ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp.259, 261.

present himself as a ‘crusading moderniser’, supporting causes such as the women’s suffrage movement publicly in his stores through selling suffrage magazines and allowing shopgirls to wear merchandise displaying their affiliation.³⁰ As Pamela Cox and Annabel Hobley have argued, this was predominantly a marketing strategy to profit from middle-class women shoppers interested in the suffrage movement, and Harry Gordon Selfridge’s sexist views of women’s place within retail moderate his image as a progressive.³¹ Despite this, the context here demonstrates that Selfridge understood the impact and profitable potential of giving controversial causes and topics a presence in the department store. As proven by *Married Love*, commercialised sexual advice could attract attention and money.³² His aforementioned approval of Stopes’s CDC—although emphasising the fine line he walked with his public support—suggests that displaying advice literature aligned with both his personal views and commercial strategy.

W.H. Smith & Son’s Sex Book ‘Black List’

The sale of sex instruction books was not always straightforward, however, complicating the picture of accessibility beyond London. Variation in whether and *how* a book was sold in different locations indicate that scholarship can do more to unpick the nuances underpinning the more general picture of where books about sex were found. W.H. Smith’s refusal to ‘stock or display’ Haire’s *Birth Control Methods* or any books on birth control in 1936, and the

³⁰ Pamela Cox and Annabel Hobley, *Shopgirls: The True Story Behind the Counter* (London, 2014), pp.133, 119.

³¹ *Ibid*, pp.118-119, 140.

³² Alexander Geppert, 'Divine Sex, Happy Marriage, Regenerated Nation: Marie Stopes's Marital Manual 'Married Love' and the Making of a Best-Seller, 1918-1955', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8:3 (1998), pp.389-433.

bookseller's insistence that they would only 'obtain copies for customers' orders, is revealing of this.³³ Earlier correspondence between Stopes and W.H. Smith's indicates that the bookseller also refused to distribute a monthly circular of birth control information for her, and she attempted to appeal to their respectable image by arguing how important it was to be 'dignified' and 'do birth control propaganda in the right way.'³⁴ Earlier on in 1908, W.H. Smith's circulating library had released a statement with a number of other libraries to state that they refused to circulate any books deemed 'scandalous, libellous, immoral, or otherwise disagreeable' that might offend subscribers, suggesting that these incidents were not uncharacteristic of the company as a whole.³⁵

The letters therefore demonstrate that limits were placed on accessibility by booksellers. If customers already knew about a book, they could purchase it, thus limiting the readership considerably. There is evidence of W.H. Smith's obtaining copies of other advice texts when requested, for example, the Harrogate store asked for three copies of Stopes's pamphlet *A Letter to Working Mothers* in 1919.³⁶ Moreover, Chesser's *Love Without Fear* was sold in their bookshops, suggesting that this chain did sell sex instruction books.³⁷ Regardless, the bookshop's management clearly saw themselves as having an important role in mediating who gained access to such texts, an effort they were not alone in. For instance, in Sue Bradley's oral

³³ AUC 48/11, letter from Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (25 May 1936).

³⁴ BL, MS 58691, General Correspondence, Vol. CCXLV (ff.224, 136, 178, 192), January 1922-June 1922, f.200, letter from W.H. Smith & Son to Marie Stopes (30 May 1922); f. 201, letter from Stopes to W.H. Smith & Son (2 June 1922).

³⁵ Phillip Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain, 1870-1918* (Oxford, 2008), p.9.

³⁶ BL, MS 58685, General Correspondence, Vol. CCXXXIX (ff.146), 1919, f.104, letter from Hilda Nash to Marie Stopes (16 August 1919). On *A Letter to Working Mothers*, see June Rose, *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution* (London, 1992), pp.125-126.

³⁷ Craig, 'Recent Developments in the Law of Obscene Libel', pp.302-327; Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p. 262.

history of the book trade, one interviewee recalled a woman asking for a marital advice book in Blackwell's bookshop; the manager went to the basement and retrieved a copy from 'The Box', a safe for books considered inappropriate.³⁸ Such regulation of advice literature hinged on an enduring assumption across the twentieth century about the censorship of obscene literature more generally that to make a book less visible was to limit its readership, and to display it was to make it knowable.³⁹

Correspondence between Stanley Unwin and the Marriage Guidance Council (MGC) suggests that reputational reasons were behind W.H. Smith's reluctance to sell books about sex: 'W.H. Smith & Son have some difficulty allowing the managers of their innumerable shops to stock books dealing with sex because they are so liable to buy the undesirable kind and to get the retailer into ill repute.'⁴⁰ Concerns over 'undesirable' literature causing the bookseller reputational damage were thus likely underpinning the company's earlier decision to refuse *Birth Control Methods* as well. It appears that specifically, books dealing with contraception were of concern to the management, as others that dealt with reproduction and relationships more generally did appear in their stock. The importance of reputation to W.H. Smith's is commonly recognised in historiography. Stephen Colclough has written that the company envisaged themselves as 'a source of respectable reading matter', whilst Mary Hammond has noted that the rise of the W.H. Smith's empire was shaped by the ideological intersection of the 'mood of self-help' rendering appropriate reading as a mode of 'securing social standing'.⁴¹

³⁸ Sue Bradley, (ed), *The British Book Trade: An Oral History* (London, 2008), p.178.

³⁹ Kevin Birmingham, *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses* (London, 2014), pp.217-218.

⁴⁰ AUC 605/3, letter from Stanley Unwin to A. Joseph Brayshaw (20 February 1953).

⁴¹ Stephen Colclough, "A Larger Outlay Than Any Return": The Library Of W.H. Smith & Son, 1860-1873', *Publishing History*, 54 (2003), p.67; Hammond, Reading, p.67.

Stocking ‘inoffensive’ material that pertained to middle-class values was firmly part of the company’s vision of ‘public service’ by the interwar period.⁴² W.H. Smith’s more cautious approach to supplying sex instruction books thus demonstrates how, in contrast to Selfridges which capitalised on controversy in favour of profit, the availability of these texts to a broader population in regional, classed, and gendered terms was not homogenous across retailers, and involved negotiations firmly rooted in notions of respectability.

Complicating this, a later exchange between Michael Hornby at W.H. Smith’s and Unwin reveals either that the publisher may have misinterpreted the bookseller’s policy in the 1930s, or that their approach to distributing advice literature had changed by 1950. Unwin had accused W.H. Smith’s of having a ‘so-called black list’ when he was attempting to negotiate for them to display *Guide to Marriage* (1948) by Congregationalist minister and chairman of the Birmingham MGC, Leslie Tizard. Unwin was surprised that the bookseller would not circulate this publication because, after all, it was religious and approved by the MGC, demanding that Hornby investigate the situation.⁴³ Hornby told Unwin he had ‘got hold of the wrong end of the stick’ and they had no such list.⁴⁴ The accusation was passed to Kenyon Foat, who clarified their position:

[...] we have no black list. We do, however, take certain precautions with regard to the handling of books of sex instructions. These precautions amount principally to 1) that

⁴² Hammond, *Reading*, p.68.

⁴³ AUC 476/4, letter from Stanley Unwin to Michael Hornby (7 June 1950); Leslie Tizard, *Guide to Marriage* (London, 1948); Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English women, sex, and contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford, 2004), p.353.

⁴⁴ AUC 476/4, letter from Michael Hornby to Stanley Unwin (20 June 1950).

our shops may order such stock only from Strand House; 2) that they may not display it. They can, however, stock it quite freely on the shelves.⁴⁵

It is possible the bookshop would have *stocked* advice literature but refused to *display* it in the 1930s; however, archival evidence does not elucidate this. Despite this, we do know that into the 1940s and certainly by 1950, the company had instruction books on the shelves. This is further emphasised in Unwin's correspondence with the MGC, where he indicated that W.H. Smith's had agreed to circulate the MGC's pamphlets of recommended books on sex to bookshop managers, and authorise them to order and sell the listed titles.⁴⁶ The distinction between shelving and displaying a book has not been sufficiently teased out by historians, yet this exchange demonstrates the importance of acknowledging *how* a book was sold in a particular context: whether it was for customer orders only, stacked on the shelves between other books, or put out on display to promote it more obviously. Porter and Hall stated that so-called 'respectable' booksellers usually regarded sex instruction books as for limited audiences, supported by Foat's insistence on 'precautions' to be taken with their sale.⁴⁷ However, they do not delve much further into how this impacted the ways in which a book was sold in this particular context, something the correspondence that distinguished between shelving and displaying a book helps to illuminate, as I elaborate next.

⁴⁵ AUC 476/4, letter from Kenyon Foat to Stanley Unwin (16 June 1950).

⁴⁶ AUC 605/3, letter from Stanley Unwin to A. Joseph Brayshaw (20 February 1953); letter from A. Joseph Brayshaw to Stanley Unwin (6 March 1953); letter from Stanley Unwin to A. Joseph Brayshaw (11 March 1953).

⁴⁷ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp. 261-262; AUC 476/4 letter from Kenyon Foat to Stanley Unwin (16 June 1950).

Displaying *Birth Control Methods*

Although Foat insisted that their policy of stocking but not displaying books about sex was appropriately cautious, Unwin was critical of the lack of open promotion of advice texts:

Obviously you have to take precautions about books dealing with sex instruction. My feeling is that the comparatively few outstandingly good books endorsed by such an authoritative body as the Marriage Guidance Council, and particularly those with a definite religious background, should be freely sold, because if the good books are readily available then there is no excuse for people buying the bad. The question arose because there were certain shops which used to sell this particular book freely, but no longer do so, and it is an outstandingly good book of a kind that is badly needed by young couple [sic] who will be unaware of its existence if it is never shown.⁴⁸

This letter demonstrated why Unwin thought displaying books was so important: it would bring the ideal young, married reader who needed ‘good’, authoritative information about sex into contact with it where they would be otherwise unaware of its existence. This assumption was reinforced in later correspondence between Unwin and the MGC, where he expressed that he had told the chief buyer for W.H. Smith’s that ‘if reputable shops do not sell the best books on the subject, it drives people to other channels where they will be offered less desirable books.’⁴⁹ The emphasis on the dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex advice was repeatedly employed

⁴⁸ AUC 476/4, letter from Stanley Unwin to Kenyon Foat (20 June 1950).

⁴⁹ AUC 605/3, letter from Stanley Unwin to A. Joseph Brayshaw (20 February 1953).

by the publisher to emphasise the value of their books dealing with sex as respectable, and justify requests to openly promote such publications.

Thus throughout Unwin's correspondence with W.H. Smith's, the publisher emphasises the importance of display for promoting and encouraging book sales of the 'good' kind of books. For example, in 1923, the bookseller had written to some of its bookshops with the A&U catalogue of new books, questioning why sales in some areas had been low: '[...] as the public do not see these books in our shops, they go with their orders to those shops where they do see them [...]. Probably, even when we are carrying the books in stock we all too seldom give them a show in the window.'⁵⁰ These letters were sent following extensive correspondence between Unwin and a representative of W.H. Smith's where they discussed reasons for low sales and strategies for remedying this, with the crux of Unwin's suggestions being the need to display books in order for the public to see them. Drafted with Unwin's assistance, then, this letter illustrated the relationship between the display, awareness, and sale of books. Displays were understood by the publisher and bookseller as useful for increasing interest in a text 'before the boom' in its popularity, as Unwin explained.⁵¹ Layouts of W.H. Smith's bookshops recorded by MO in the 1940s (**Image 1**) suggest the importance of the physicality of encounters with books:

⁵⁰ AUC 11/6, letter from W.H. Smith & Son to 'All "B" Shops' (15 November 1923).

⁵¹ AUC 11/6, letter from Stanley Unwin to Mr. Roy (6 February 1924). Emphasis original.

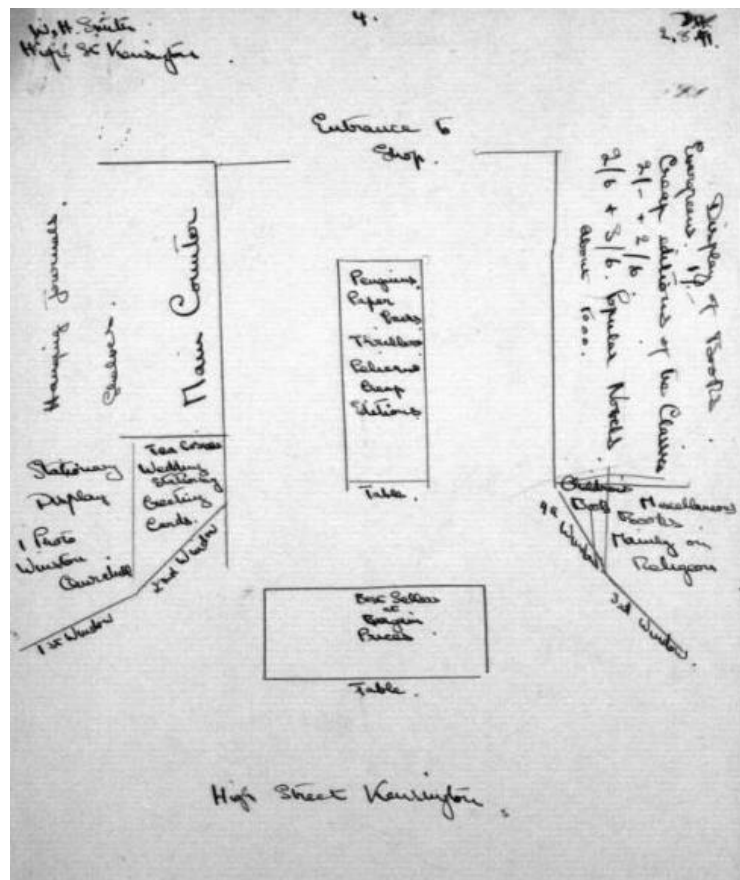


Image 1 W.H. Smith's bookshop, Kensington High Street, London, 1941.⁵²

The layout of the built environment in this image gives a sense of how the bookshop space was moved around and interacted with. The observer labelled tables and counters with books displayed and shelved, showing that cheap, popular fiction and non-fiction paperbacks were made easily accessible to members of the public through this. It emphasises the ways in which bookshops were specifically centred around the effectiveness of displaying goods.

⁵² MOA, TC Reading Habits 1937-1947, 20-3-E Bookshops 1941, Image 2115, W.H. Smith's Kensington High Street floor plan.

Similar conclusions about the significance of displays can be drawn from the sale of *Birth Control Methods* in Selfridges and Harrods. A&U wanted to ensure Haire's book was able to 'stand on the counter' in the two stores rather than be 'kept out of sight' behind or underneath it.⁵³ Photographs of these department store's interiors provide a visual example of how products were displayed, a key promotional strategy. For example, in the photograph below (**Image 2**), books are displayed on tables in Harrods:



Image 2 The book department at Harrods, London, April 1919.⁵⁴

⁵³ AUC 48/11, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (18 July 1936).

⁵⁴ Historic England, The Bedford Lemere Collection (BL24450/023). With thanks to Historic England for permission to reproduce this photograph.

Twentieth-century British department stores slowly shifted from traditional extensive window displays and formal counter-based service to in-store displays to compete with increasingly popular variety and chain stores like Woolworth's and Marks & Spencer.⁵⁵ As Peter Scott and James Walker have argued, making 'all goods available for inspection without reference to a sales assistant, and with clearly marked prices, was key to attracting customers'.⁵⁶ Selfridges had success with this advertising strategy from its opening, which Walker and Scott have argued sparked others, like Harrods, to adopt open displays as a new approach to promotion.⁵⁷ It is important to note, however, that Erika Rappaport has critiqued the common view of Selfridges as the sole, leading department store that influenced promotional and sales techniques across Britain. She has argued that Harry Gordon Selfridge wanted to be associated with a new age of shopping, and whilst he did 'rework pre-existing meanings and structures', he did not 'have the final word about the department store', although this debate is less relevant here than the fact that these new approaches included the open display of advice literature.⁵⁸ So what, then, was the significance of this to shoppers?

Selfridges' advertising purposefully emphasised the 'spaciousness' of the built environment, describing the store's 'eight great stories', 'six acres of floor area' which shoppers were encouraged to 'linger' in to take in the 'delights' of the space and merchandise it contained.⁵⁹ The advertisement quoted here described the luxurious built environment and placed shoppers

⁵⁵ Peter Scott and James Walker, 'Advertising, promotion, and the competitive advantage of interwar British department stores', *Economic History Review*, 63:4 (2010), pp.1109-1110.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.1111.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.1110.

⁵⁸ Erika D. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, 2001), pp.142-176, 177.

⁵⁹ *The Times*, 'Selfridges's', 18 March 1909, p.4.

within it, imagining how they might have moved through it, either slowly and lingering, or quickly and comfortably using the store's electric lifts.⁶⁰ The architecture and construction of the space was at the centre of Selfridges' image and appeal, whilst the sensory pleasures of shopping were prominent in the store's advertising, transforming the experience into one of pleasure and leisure coded explicitly as feminine and heterosocial.⁶¹ As Leif Jerram and Ralph Kingston have argued, foregrounding the materiality of space helps to locate it as a medium which people interact and exist *in* rather than just *through*.⁶²

This was, in part, an effort to appeal to a wider spectrum of shoppers from different class backgrounds in the context of a capital city that—despite high levels of poverty—was expanding and becoming more accessible to a diverse range of people, even if not everyone could afford to actually buy the goods on offer.⁶³ In these efforts to collapse class divisions usually reinforced through separate shopping areas in traditional London department stores such as Liberty's, the department store became in theory an accessible space for shoppers from a range of backgrounds.⁶⁴ Illustrating this, MO had observed people from different class backgrounds browsing books in Selfridges in 1934, including two thirty-five-year-old women and a twenty-five-year-old man from class C (lower-middle- and upper-working class), and a man and woman of around the same age from class B (upper- and middle-class).⁶⁵ MO

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, pp.147, 154, 159-161.

⁶² Leif Jerram, 'Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis', *History and Theory*, 52:3 (2013), pp.400-419; Ralph Kingston, 'Mind Over Matter? History and the Spatial Turn', *Cultural and Social History*, 7:1 (2010), p.114.

⁶³ Cox and Holey, *Shopgirls*, pp.137-138; Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, pp.145-147, 150.

⁶⁴ Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, p.151.

⁶⁵ MOA, TC Reading Habits 1937-1947, 20-8-D Reading Observations, 'Bookshop Observations: Selfridge's Book Dept. ground floor, Obs. 1.', 'Obs. No.2. Selfridge's Book dept', and 'Obs. No. 3.' (23 June 1943).

categorised all members of the public observed in their surveys into such class categories, typically indicated in the introduction of their reports.⁶⁶ The observer noted that in the case of one couple, ‘it wasn’t a question of books that they entered [...] merely that of filling time’.⁶⁷ This illustrates the range of people that likely came into contact with *Birth Control Methods* in Selfridges. Although difficult to determine this exactly, and this example only accounts for those able to reach London’s urban shopping areas, these sources suggest that whilst buying advice literature was not possible for everyone, encountering such books in public settings was a distinct possibility for a wider range of people than has previously been recognised. Thus foregrounding the spatial and material elements of book display and how this facilitated access to sexual knowledges is important for promoting a deeper understanding of how advice literature was encountered, what moments of encounter felt like physically and emotionally, and what this meant on a cultural level, as explored in more detail next.

‘Constantly picked up and looked at’: Materiality, Senses, Emotions, and Access

The sensory and material experience of access to sex instruction books is a fragmentary feature of the correspondence between A&U and Haire. The letter that opened this chapter gestures towards how members of the public physically came into contact with *Birth Control Methods* in Selfridges, worth quoting at length here:

⁶⁶ Class ‘C’ represented lower-middle- and upper-working class people, whilst class ‘D’ referred to the ‘unskilled working class’, and class ‘B’ represented upper- and middle-class people. For example, see MOA, FR 1332 ‘Books and the Public’ (July 1942) p.4.

⁶⁷ MOA, TC Reading Habits 1937-1947, 20-8-D Reading Observations, ‘Bookshop Observations. Obs. No.3.’ (23 June 1943).

Our traveller assures me that they have stock of the book below the counter, but they have put it out of sight because the assistant found that the copy displayed simply became damaged and unsaleable after a few days because it was constantly picked up and looked at by people who were curious as to the contents but had no intention of buying it! The difficulty has to be met by providing Selfridges with a free copy which can stand on the counter simply for the purpose of being thumbed and copies sold have of course to be drawn from the supply which they keep out of sight.⁶⁸

Sight and touch enabled people to engage with the book on the display, something A&U wished to encourage with the provision of a free copy, to avoid the less-desired situation of the book behind kept behind the counter, out of sight and touch, ostensibly to protect it from damage. How books physically felt is emphasised throughout MO's observations and surveys, foregrounding the importance of materiality. For instance, one directive respondent wrote that they 'like a book that looks and feels good', whilst another remarked that they 'will not buy good literature with a bad or ugly binding', and a third commented that they 'tend to concentrate almost entirely on the type of book which can be carried most easily; and one which [they] shall not mind damaging [...]'.⁶⁹ Three quarters of respondents MO surveyed consciously considered print, binding, book size, and jacket when picking a book.⁷⁰ This emphasis on how a book looked, felt, and could be engaged with physically draws attention to the ways in which encounters with books were embodied. Extrapolating this discussion from the A&U letter through exploring the phenomenology of access to books in the MO archive, the profoundly

⁶⁸ AUC 48/1, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (18 July 1936).

⁶⁹ MOA, FR 1332 'Books and the Public' (July 1942) pp.145-146.

⁷⁰ MOA, FR 2018 'Books and the Public' (February 1944), pp.102-103.

embodied experience of browsing for books and buying them stands out, suggesting how sensory encounter was fundamental to facilitating access to sexual knowledge in this context.

The materiality of books connected with shopper's sensory experiences. The 'curious' people in Selfridges who came across *Birth Control Methods* 'constantly picked [the book] up and looked at [it]', they 'thumbed' the pages to the point of damage.⁷¹ Tactile and visual engagement with books in and through a space was paralleled in MO's observational and diary survey material on reading and the public. Visiting the Selfridges book department, one diarist wrote that shoppers 'dithered round aimlessly picking up books', emphasising the tactility of browsing the shelves and their unfocused, unstructured movement through the space of the shop.⁷² In 1944, MO reported that whilst many went to bookshops intending to buy specific books, 'to browse around and perhaps be attracted by another book' was a clear pattern amongst survey respondents; one shopper surveyed indicated that 'to look around and see if anything interest[ed them]' was an important part of their book-buying process.⁷³ This is corroborated in Bradley's oral history, where an interviewee described how customers (especially those who could not afford to buy books), would repeatedly pick up books from the shelves to read in the shop.⁷⁴ Although in MO's surveys, 'Haphazard' book selection was important for a small percentage of their respondents (seven per cent of men, and eight per cent of women) when *purchasing* books, browsing and sensory engagement with books in an unstructured way was nevertheless shown to be significant in how the public encountered books more broadly.⁷⁵ The

⁷¹ AUC 48/1, letter from George Allen & Unwin to Norman Haire (18 July 1936).

⁷² MOA, TC Reading Habits 1937-1947, 20-5-C Diary Extracts, 'Books. Diary. coL.11. Teacher.' (8 April 1942).

⁷³ MOA, File Report (henceforth: FR) 2018 'Books and the Public' (February 1944), pp.151, 152.

⁷⁴ Bradley, *The British Book Trade*, p.73.

⁷⁵ MOA, FR 2018, 'Books and the Public' (February 1944), pp.99-100.

casual, unstructured browsing of books gestures towards how people in Selfridges would have encountered *Birth Control Methods* through their movement around the book department and their visual engagement with the displays and shelves.

In these sources, interaction with books was explicitly intersensory, engaging sight and touch in particular, and also prompting emotional responses. This is further illustrated in MO's observations. An observer in Selfridges book department described the sensory interactions of two lower-middle-class women in their mid-thirties:

They stop at the counter [...] but don't rush to pick up the nearest book. On the contrary, their eyes appear to take in the whole range of books on view. F35C (navy blue) finally picks up "Tanks and Tank Folk" and opens it at the first page, and again about the middle.⁷⁶

Unlike the diarist's sporadic picking up of books, these women interacted more slowly and intentionally with the book displays, but likewise, the intersensory nature of this moment is clear. MO observed similar in other bookshops, including the aforementioned encounter between two young women and Laird's *Venereal Disease in Britain* outside Foyles, Charing Cross Road:

One of them moves away and picks up a Penguins [sic]. She beckons to the other. [...] As they turn the pages one of them ejaculates "good heavens". When anybody

⁷⁶ MOA, TC Reading Habits, 1937-1947, 20-8-D Reading Observations, 'Bookshop Observations: Selfridge's Book Dept. ground floor, Obs. 1.' (23 June 1943).

approaches, they give a jerk. But continue to turn the pages and read bits here and there. As they put it down, Inv. [sic] hears one of them saying “it must be an awful thing” and as she says “ugh” she shudders.⁷⁷

Here, we get a sense of access to sex instruction books as a phenomenological experience that encompassed both an embodied encounter and an emotional response. The book was picked up, pages turned and looked at in a scattered manner, and the intertwining of emotional responses of shock and disgust in spoken and physical reactions was recorded by the observer. The observation reads as a somewhat haphazard parody of a sex scene, perhaps revealing of the observer’s quiet amusement at witnessing the young women’s encounter with Laird’s book. It is well-established by historians such as Rappaport that embodied and emotional experiences were central to shopping. As she wrote about Selfridges, ‘Oral, tactile, and visual pleasures defined and amplified one another in kinaesthetic array. All appetites were united in a single desiring body.’⁷⁸ The observation of the two women reflects this, bringing the moment of encounter with sexual knowledges to life. Bradley’s oral history further emphasises the intertwining of the sensory and emotional, with interviewees recalling the how entering a bookshop, browsing books, and interacting with staff ‘felt’ for them on both levels.⁷⁹ This supports Simeon Koole’s claim that tactility, or physical interactions with spaces and the material, changed Briton’s relationship with themselves and the world around them.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ MOA, TC Reading Habits 1937-1947, 20-8-D Reading Observations, Foyles Charing Cross Rd. (22 June 1943).

⁷⁸ Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, p.168.

⁷⁹ Bradley, *The British Book Trade*, pp.107-109.

⁸⁰ Simeon Koole, ‘How We Came to Mind the Gap: Time, Tactility, and the Tube’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 27:4 (2016), pp.524-554; Simeon Koole, ‘Nervous hands, stolen kisses, and the press of everyday life: touch in Britain, 1870-1960’, PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2017.

However, there is no way to know what information from this moment these women retained, or if it was meaningful in their lives in any way after this fleeting moment of encounter. Constance Classen has called sensory histories ‘inferred history’; senses are frequently taken for granted and only implied in source material, meaning a history of touch must ‘move sideways from a suggestive phrase’.⁸¹ Yet the snippets of encounters with sexual knowledges and books more broadly drawn on here provides room for an imagining of visual, embodied, and emotional moments of encounter. In combination with the previous section on the display of books, they give a sense of ‘lived space’, a concept theorised by philosopher Henri Lefebvre that asks how, beneath representations of material space, it was experienced in an embodied sense.⁸² As Alice Garner has suggested, this framework can be used to encapsulate ‘bodily experiences’ that are difficult to preserve, because of their brevity and physicality.⁸³ As encounters with books in bookshops as described were often ephemeral, brief moments within the wider movement of people’s everyday lives, they are tricky to analyse. However, the source material I have used here takes us beyond the static suggestion of a moment of encounter, going some distance towards reconstructing the dynamic, embodied, and emotional moments that have been side-lined in the current historiography on advice literature. This demonstrates that it is not only significant who encountered such publications, but where and how these moments of encounters happened and how they were physically experienced is fundamental to fleshing out the process of sexual knowledge diffusion which, as Doan has claimed, often ‘eludes scrutiny’.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana, 2012), p.xxvii.

⁸² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, first published 1974 (Oxford, 1991).

⁸³ Alice Garner, *The Shifting Shore: Locals, Outsiders, and the Transformation of a French Fishing Town, 1823-2000* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), p.7.

⁸⁴ Doan, ‘Troubling Popularisation’, p.308.

Married Love and the National Library for the Blind

Where else could advice literature be accessed beyond retail spaces? Public libraries across Britain were another location where members of the public physically encountered a wide range of books, yet they were extremely censored spaces where readership was closely watched and moderated. As library historians have noted—including Alistair Black, Clare Ravenwood and John Feather—sexually explicit literature was often hidden, indicating high degrees of authoritative control over what the public came into contact with.⁸⁵ Specifically, Porter and Hall claimed that most public libraries refused requests to stock sexual, marital, and contraceptive advice literature, whilst those that did kept it out of sight, with reference to a single case of a library refusing to stock Marie Stopes's books found in her correspondence collection to support this point.⁸⁶ The expectation that advice literature was not readily available in public libraries has been questioned little since this claim. However, ephemeral evidence from a range of archives gestures towards the multiple and varied ways this literature existed in publicly accessible spaces and provides more texture to the movement of sexual knowledges through the public library system than has been available in the aforementioned histories to this point.

⁸⁵ Alistair Black, 'False optimism: modernity, class, and the public library in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s', *Libraries & Culture*, 38:3 (2003), p.290; Alistair Black, 'Everton Public Library', *Victorian Review*, 30:1 (2013), pp.43-44; Clare Ravenwood and John Feather, 'Censorship and book selection in British public librarianship, 1919-1939: professional perspectives', *Library & Information History*, 26:4 (2010), pp.258-271. See also Anthony Hugh Thompson, *Censorship in Public Libraries in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century* (Epping, 1975).

⁸⁶ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp.259, 347; Wellcome: PP/MCS/A/223, correspondence with NWS (1935).

In 1924, Constance Bellhouse, Secretary and Librarian at the NLB's London branch, requested permission from publisher G.P. Putnam's Sons Ltd. to produce braille copies of Marie Stopes's *Married Love* after readers had found out about it in *Horizon* magazine. Constant Huntington, Chairman of Putnam's, granted permission for a braille copy of the book to be produced.⁸⁷ Bellhouse was a campaigner for women's suffrage who believed that the NLB was an important resource that enriched the lives of visually impaired people in ways beyond the possibilities presented by an 'ordinary library'.⁸⁸ Indeed, as disability historians Pieter Verstraete and Ylva Söderfeldt have argued, educational institutions for people with sensory disabilities such as blindness 'significantly altered' how people 'related to the world, but also the ways the world related to them'.⁸⁹ The following year, another Librarian at the NLB requested Stopes's *Wise Parenthood* (1919) also be translated into braille following readers' requests.⁹⁰ Permissions were given for two copies.⁹¹ Marking the beginning of marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice literature being available to blind readers through the public library service, the provision of Stopes's books through the NLB initiated blind readers as participants in a wider conversation on sex, bodies, and birth control proliferating in 1920s Britain and beyond.

Established in 1882 by Martha Arnold and Carlota Dow in a 'little room in Hampstead', the Library initially ran on a voluntary basis as a subscription library costing one penny per week

⁸⁷ PRH MS, letter from Constance Bellhouse to G.P. Putnam's Sons Ltd. (2 August 1924); letter from Constant Huntington to Constance Bellhouse (18 August 1924) letter from Constance Bellhouse to G.P. Putnam's Sons Ltd. (19 August 1924).

⁸⁸ Constance Bellhouse, 'The National Library for the Blind', *The Vote* (16 December 1927), p.398.

⁸⁹ Pieter Verstraete and Ylva Söderfeldt, 'Deaf-Blindness and the Institutionalization of Special Education in Nineteenth-Century Europe' in Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, Kim E. Nielsen, (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History* (Oxford, 2018), p.266.

⁹⁰ PRH MS, letter from Norah Brooks to G.P. Putnam's Sons Ltd. (8 January 1925).

⁹¹ PRH MS, letter from G.P. Putnam's Sons, Ltd. to Norah Brooks (26 January 1925); Marie Stopes, *Wise Parenthood: The Treatise on Birth Control for Married People* (London, 1919).

lending out a ‘scanty stock of books’ to readers. Arnold, blind herself, acted as Librarian, and she and Dow ran the organisation together for sixteen years and through two premises relocations.⁹² Beginning with a collection of just fifty braille volumes lent out to ten registered readers, by the turn of the century, the NLB’s work had expanded significantly. They employed salaried staff and incorporated a series of smaller braille libraries in the North, leading to acquisition of free public library status in 1916, and the establishment of the Northern Branch in Manchester in 1917 with 8,000 volumes and fewer than a hundred readers. By 1919, the Northern Branch alone held 12,000 volumes with over 500 registered readers.⁹³ The Central Library in London had an approximate country-wide circulation of over two-hundred-thousand books that same year, sending out an average of five-hundred books per day. These figures did not include books obtained indirectly through public libraries and other institutions supplied with consignments by the NLB, which numbered over one-hundred that year and consisted of societies and public libraries nationally and internationally, making total circulation likely a lot higher.⁹⁴ By the time Bellhouse was requesting to make copies of Stopes’s best-seller, then, the organisation was the primary book supplier for Britain’s approximate thirty-five thousand blind citizens, its importance further propelled by the volume of servicemen returning blinded from the conflicts of the First World War.⁹⁵

⁹² BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (December 1919), p.12; Allan Leach, ‘National Library for the Blind: its past, present and prospects’, *Health Libraries Review*, 1 (1984), p.1.

⁹³ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (December 1919), pp.6, 7; Leach, ‘National Library for the Blind’, p.1.

⁹⁴ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (December 1919), pp.6, 7, 36-37.

⁹⁵ Thomas Kelly, *A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain, 1845-1975* (London, 1977), p.288; BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (December 1919), p.13. In 1947, MO estimated the blind population of Britain was in the ten thousand to one-hundred-thousand range: MOA, FR 2536 ‘Charity and the Blind’, November 1947, p.37. However, in the interwar period, the National League of the Blind estimated there were approximately thirty-five thousand blind people in the United Kingdom: BL, P.P.1108.kb, *The Blind Advocate*, 21:292 (August 1924), p.1; Matthias Reiss, ‘Forgotten Pioneers of the National Protest March: The National League

The translation of Stopes's works into braille raises questions about how access to sexual knowledges was facilitated and experienced differently for and by those with sensory disabilities through the NLB as a mediating institution. Despite disabled people being present in all histories, they and the institutions that shaped their lives, selves, and relationships have frequently occupied the margins of histories of sex in particular.⁹⁶ Little has been written on blind people's experiences with acquiring sexual knowledge beyond the argument that sex education for blind secondary school children was almost non-existent in the twentieth century, as proposed in brief in Jean Margaret Normanton Erry's thesis on blind children's education more broadly.⁹⁷ The limited scholarship on the NLB, predominantly written by librarians of the institution Allan Leach and William Munford, has not engaged with their supply of advice literature at all.⁹⁸ Broader histories of public libraries, publishing, and reading have paid limited attention to blind readers and braille, despite recent work on other reading technologies illustrating growing interest in this area.⁹⁹ Even histories of the extension of the public library movement in Britain such as by Martin Hewitt have not included the NLB within their remit

of the Blind's Marches to London, 1920 & 1936', *Labour History Review*, 70:2 (2005), pp.139-140.

⁹⁶ Douglas Baynton, 'Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History' in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, (eds), *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York, 2001), p.52.

⁹⁷ Jean Margaret Normanton Erry, "They can because they think they can?": the education of pupils at two secondary schools for the blind, 1920-58', PhD thesis, The Open University, 2011, p.360. In the American context, there is also limited work on this theme: Patrick White, 'Sex education; or, how the blind became heterosexual', *GLQ*, 9:1-2 (2003), pp.133-147.

⁹⁸ Leach, 'National Library for the Blind', pp.1-7; Allan Leach, 'The National Library for the Blind: Beginning a Second Century', *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, 3:1 (1985), pp.11-13; William Munford, 'A Short History of the National Library for the Blind', *Library History*, 12:1 (1996), pp.253-262.

⁹⁹ Kelly, *Public Libraries*, pp.191, 241, 288, 395; Rubery, 'From shell shock to shellac', pp.1-25; Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*.

regardless of its position as a public library.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, scholarship on sex and disability in Britain has typically foregrounded the sexualisation of blind women and reading prior to the twentieth century or the associations between blindness and venereal disease, as by Vanessa Warne and Elizabeth Stephens respectively.¹⁰¹ Whilst there has been some conversation in the American context around the desexualisation of blind people congruent with a broader rendering of disabled bodies as vulnerable, child-like, or sexually incapacitated.¹⁰²

Speaking to the relationship between print culture, sex, and disability, *Married Love's* braille translation is therefore a significant moment in the history of the production and circulation of advice literature that has, until now, gone unrecognised as a meaningful piece in the jigsaw of the development of Britain's sexual culture in the twentieth century. Using the NLB's supply of advice literature as a case study presents an opportunity to evolve the current limited literature that draws together these themes. In doing so, I foreground the agency of blind readers in this process, whilst discussing the connections between disability, respectability politics, eugenics, and self-help to tease out the multiple reasons for and meanings of the NLB's dual role as a translator and circulator of sexual advice. I also develop the first part of this chapter to deconstructing the sensory and material experience of encountering advice books recognising—through using disability as a category of analysis—how this was mediated within and through different bodies. I ultimately argue that the movement of advice literature within

¹⁰⁰ Martin Hewitt, 'Extending the public library, 1850-1930' in Alistair Black and Peter Hoare, (eds), *Libraries in Britain and Ireland, Volume III: 1850-2000* (Cambridge, 2008), pp.72-81.

¹⁰¹ Vanessa Warne, 'Between the Sheets: Contagion, Touch, and Text', *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 19 (2014), pp.1-9; Elizabeth Stephens, 'Sex as a normalising technology: early-twentieth-century public sex education campaigns', *Psychology & Sexuality*, 1:3 (2010), pp.271-272

¹⁰² Tom Shakespeare, Kath Gillespie-Sells, and Dominic Davies, *The Sexual Politics of Disability: Untold Desires* (London, 1996), pp.3-11.

and through the public library system is revealing of the changing and variable relationship between public and private in the realm of sexual knowledges in the interwar and immediate post-war periods.

A Typical Public Library? Readers at the National Library for the Blind

The reach of the NLB's services by geography, class, age, and gender helps ascertain the demographic of readers with the opportunity to access advice books through this channel. I focus on these demographic markers because they are the main categorisations discernible in the archival material—the racial and ethnic makeup of library readership, whether of the NLB or public libraries more broadly, does not feature in any material I have consulted, nor in the secondary literature. The number of direct Library users was only a small portion of the blind population.¹⁰³ However, it was nevertheless the main book supply service for blind readers, and the number of other libraries and organisations receiving consignments gave it a broad geographical reach within Britain and even beyond.¹⁰⁴ For instance, Birmingham's Central Library began supplying braille books early in the century following the example of Dundee Library in Scotland; by the 1920s, Birmingham had fifty-seven braille borrowers, with volume issues numbering almost three-thousand between October 1922 and September 1923, increasing throughout the decade.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Reiss, 'Forgotten Pioneers', pp.139-140.

¹⁰⁴ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (December 1919), pp.7, 36-37.

¹⁰⁵ Library of Birmingham, Birmingham City Council Records (henceforth: BCC), Lending Library Books Sub-committee Minutes Book, 1909-1921 (BCC/1/AT/9/1/3); Lending Library Books Sub-committee Minutes Book, 1921-1935 (BCC/1/AT/9/1/4).

In the Library's early years, the subscription costs and practicalities of having to collect books or pay for 'carriage' charges were prohibitive to lower-income blind people and those with limited mobility, as was the case for able bodied readers with circulating libraries prior to the Public Libraries Act of 1850.¹⁰⁶ Numbers of blind people who were either homeless or begging in the 1920s were high, thus many would have struggled to afford to use library services.¹⁰⁷ Initially, the NLB was thus likely accessed by predominately middle-class readers or those on higher incomes, as was the case with circulating libraries prior to the 1850s, and public libraries after this point, which operated under a series of restrictions limiting for working-class people.¹⁰⁸

By the 1920s when Bellhouse wrote to Putnam's, with the removal of charges and the absorption of running costs by donations and contributions from public authorities, libraries, organisations, and individuals, obstacles to access were reduced, and the Library's broad user base was reflected in increased numbers of registered readers and volume circulation. Lists of subscriber and circulation numbers illustrating this were presented in annual report pamphlets. For instance, the circulation for London jumped from 47,000 in 1916 to 69,000 in 1917, while reader numbers at the Northern Branch upon its opening in 1917 rose from under one hundred to over two thousand by 1926.¹⁰⁹ With the regional reach of the NLB's consignments to local public library branches, braille books could be borrowed by people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds across Britain and beyond. Hammond has noted that whilst borrowers

¹⁰⁶ Munford, 'A Short History', p.253; Hammond, *Reading*, pp. 27-29.

¹⁰⁷ Reiss, 'Forgotten Pioneers', p.140.

¹⁰⁸ Hammond, *Reading*, pp.28-33.

¹⁰⁹ Munford, 'A Short History', p.253; Leach, 'National Library for the Blind', pp.1-2; BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (March 1926), p.3; BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (December 1919), p.6; BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (March 1926), p.11.

at central libraries in the 1910s were largely middle-class, regional branches tended to see more prominent use from working-class people.¹¹⁰ MO reported in 1942 that roughly eighty-six per cent of working-class readers borrowed from public libraries, compared with eighty per cent of lower-middle- and upper-working-class people, and fifty-two per cent of upper- and middle-class people.¹¹¹

The Library also attracted a cross-generational readership, as indicated by reading competitions hosted annually from 1919 that included categories for children, adolescents, and adults of different reading abilities.¹¹² However, MO reported that younger people favoured public libraries in general, with seventy-eight per cent of under-thirties surveyed using them, compared with sixty-one per cent of over-thirties.¹¹³ It is also important to acknowledge that braille could be challenging for people who had lost their sight in old age to learn, and while other tactile reading systems were available through the NLB, they were less prevalent.¹¹⁴ *Married Love* and other advice literature was only translated into contracted braille, the most difficult form, making these books more inaccessible to younger readers or those who struggled with reading. The generational spread of NLB users and thus advice readership was likely weighted towards more literate adult readers, although readers of all ages likely engaged its services.

¹¹⁰ Hammond, *Reading*, p.34.

¹¹¹ MOA, FR 1332 'Books and the Public' (July 1942), p.69.

¹¹² BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (December 1919), p.5; BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (March 1928), pp.10-11.

¹¹³ MOA, FR 1332 'Books and the Public' (July 1942), p.67.

¹¹⁴ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Report (March 1949), p.4; Frances Mary D'Andrea, 'A history of instructional methods in uncontracted and contracted braille', *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 103:10 (2009), pp.585-594.

The NLB also focused on providing materials to appeal to users on gendered terms. The small magazine selection available in the 1930s and 1950s, illustrates this, for example, with popular American braille women's lifestyle magazine *Our Special* stocked alongside a range of scientific, literary, musical, and religious magazines.¹¹⁵ A range of literature was available inclusive of domestic topics, fiction, and military and naval histories.¹¹⁶ Across the twentieth century as reading became a commercialised pastime, gendered stereotyping of reading habits were pervasive; men read 'serious' literature and non-fiction, whilst women read 'lighter' fiction, owing to a lesser capacity for concentration.¹¹⁷ By the 1940s, twenty-six percent of women reported that they read for knowledge or education, compared with fifty per cent of men who said the same.¹¹⁸ However, it is important to acknowledge that the World Wars impacted the Library's user base significantly, something placing this case study as unique from other public libraries, and the reading interests of different demographics were not necessarily reflected in these assumptions.

In the last year of the First World War, the NLB made a public appeal for funds because of increased costs; there had been 'a sudden addition to the number of readers by the return of soldiers and sailors who have lost their sight in the war.'¹¹⁹ Ana Carden-Coyne has stated that war instigated an 'onslaught upon bodies and minds' where 'mass injury and mutilation' of bodies was thrust into the forefront of social debate and popular culture, one result of which

¹¹⁵ BL, W24-9611, NLB, *Catalogue of Books* (London, 1937), p.290; BL 11919.bb.24, NLB, *Catalogue of Books, Part II: Non-Fiction and Foreign* (London, 1952), p.293.

¹¹⁶ BL, W24-9611, NLB, *Catalogue of Books* (London, 1937), index.

¹¹⁷ MOA, FR 1332 'Books and the Public' (July 1942), pp. 179-180; Hammond, *Reading*, pp.42-45.

¹¹⁸ MOA, FR 2018 'Books and the Public' (February 1944), p.75.

¹¹⁹ *The Manchester Guardian*, 'From the archive: National Library for the Blind needs more money' (9 May 1918). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/the-northerner/2018/may/09/national--library-blind-braille-money-1918> (Accessed: 10 July 2023).

was the initiation of ‘new medical and social services’.¹²⁰ The NLB fostered direct relationships with ex-servicemen, for instance, the Central Branch worked with St. Dunstan’s Hostel for Blind Soldiers and Sailors, founded in 1914, to teach veterans how to live with blindness with importance placed on training to ready men for employment.¹²¹ In 1919, three-hundred ‘of the old St. Dunstan’s men’ regularly sent for books, ‘many of these being amongst the keenest readers,’ whilst an ‘almost daily exchange’ took place for men ‘still undergoing training’ at the hostel.¹²² Again, in 1922, ex-servicemen were amongst the ‘keenest readers’, the NLB supplying them 4,773 volumes in the year up to March, with an additional seventy-eight volumes supplied directly to St. Dunstan’s.¹²³ The Library claimed that ex-servicemen read everything from ‘the lightest of novels’ to more challenging texts.¹²⁴ It is therefore evident that ex-servicemen constituted some of the Library’s most enthusiastic readers. The mix of men and women writing to advice authors such as Stopes demonstrates the appeal of advice books across genders, further complicating the identification of the genre’s audience through the NLB.¹²⁵

As a public library, the NLB’s registered readers therefore likely reflected broader library usage, with a slightly stronger weighting towards ex-servicemen in the interwar and post-war years, albeit servicing a smaller population. As one Chief Librarian told MO, ‘A Public Library should serve all classes, ages, and both sexes’, thus it is hard to generalise their user base.¹²⁶ However,

¹²⁰ Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism, and the First World War* (Oxford, 2009), pp.1-2.

¹²¹ Vicky Iglkowski-Broad, ‘St. Dunstan’s Hostel for Blind Soldiers and Sailors’, *The National Archives Blog* (15 October 2015). Available at: <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/st-dunstans-hostel-blind-soldiers-sailors/> (Accessed: 10 July 2023).

¹²² BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (December 1919), p. 7.

¹²³ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (March 1922), p. 6.

¹²⁴ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (December 1919), p. 7.

¹²⁵ Lesley Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (Cambridge, 1991), 10-11.

¹²⁶ MOA, FR 1332 ‘Books and the Public’ (July 1942), p.70.

as Black has argued, public libraries struggled to be a classless space inclusive of all, thus any discussion of library users is moderated by this.¹²⁷ Likewise, although difficult to give specific detail on who used the NLB, the trends shown in the archival material suggest a mixed middle- and working-class user base amongst the blind population, readers of different ages, and men and women, roughly in line with the demographics of those borrowing from public libraries. The audience for advice literature through this service was therefore broad.

From *Horizon* to the National Library for the Blind: The Availability of Advice Literature

Which texts were available through the NLB is also significant. Although as far as is ascertainable, the availability of advice literature in braille began with *Married Love*, in the decades after Bellhouse's 1924 letter, it extended beyond this to include a small yet significant selection of prescriptive texts. The few surviving catalogues from the Library—produced in print and braille formats, and circulated through the postal service to readers and librarians at public libraries—indicate the presence of marital, sexual, and birth control advice books and pamphlets.¹²⁸ Physical catalogues were produced as an important finding aid at a time when books were located and delivered to readers on request.¹²⁹ The advice books featured within these were all in contracted braille—a form used by more experienced readers similar to shorthand writing—but the Library did also hold uncontracted braille, a more basic form that was easier to learn, and other tactile formats as well as music and talking books.¹³⁰ They

¹²⁷ Black, 'False optimism, p.201.

¹²⁸ Leach, 'National Library for the Blind', p.5.

¹²⁹ Bob Duckett, 'High seriousness: the reference and information role of the public library, 1850-2000' in Alistair Black and Peter Hoare, (eds), *Libraries in Britain and Ireland, Volume III: 1850-2000* (Cambridge, 2008), p.57.

¹³⁰ D'Andrea, 'A History of Instructional Methods', pp.585-594.

appeared under sections for applied arts and sciences, covering domestic and medical topics. *Married Love* was still available to readers in two volumes in 1937, although *Wise Parenthood* was, for an unknown reason, absent in the catalogue despite being translated earlier on. Readers could also obtain a pamphlet entitled ‘Venereal disease: how to fight it’. These titles were clustered under the heading ‘Massage, Medicine, and Surgery’ with other volumes mostly concerning hygiene, anatomy, massage, and disease.¹³¹

By the 1950s, the range of advice literature had expanded, filling out the catalogue with a significant number of books about the body and its management. Texts on anatomy, including specifically on female anatomy, sat alongside general health literature by physicians such as Dr Charles Hill, the ‘Radio Doctor’. Religious literature on birth control and marriage was included too, for instance, *Birth Control by a doctor and a priest*, an essay produced by the Catholic Truth Society, which came with *Duties of Married Life*, a pastoral letter by Cardinal Mercier. Presbyterian minister and doctor Herbert A. Gray’s *Successful Marriage* (1941) was one of the more well-known books available, whilst Stopes’s *Married Love* featured alongside *Wise Parenthood*—also spanning two volumes—and Wright’s *The Sex Factor in Marriage*. Readers were also able to borrow the MGC’s *Sex in Marriage* pamphlet as well. All of these were listed under the ‘Applied Science & Useful Arts’ section, still within ‘Medicine, Massage and Surgery’ heading.¹³² Although from correspondence between publisher Putnam’s and the NLB, we know that Stopes’s works were transcribed into braille in the 1920s, the few catalogues across the century that exist contain only scattered listings of these and other advice

¹³¹ BL, W24-9611, NLB, *Catalogue of Books* (1937), p.89.

¹³² BL, 11919.bb.24, NLB, *Catalogue of Books, Part II*, pp. 94-96.

texts. They nevertheless suggest that Stopes's works remained a feature of the Library's stock for a considerable time, from the mid-1920s until at least the early-1950s.

Advice books—and therefore sexual knowledges—were rendered explicitly educational and scientific through their placement in these catalogues, hinting towards the emphasis on scientific or medical framings to legitimise information about sex as serious and respectable.¹³³ Most publications originated from organisations or individuals with a clear religious background, focused on the spiritual and Christian framing of marriage in particular. This makes sense considering that some of the Library's major patrons were from religious orders, such as the Archbishops of Canterbury and York.¹³⁴ Importantly, these books were not separated from the rest of the NLB's stock, highlighting how sexual knowledges were embedded into the everyday use of the library, treated the same as any other educational books.

Significantly, the NLB was not out of step with other public libraries in this period in its supply of advice literature. For example, Stopes sent sets of *Birth Control News*, a newsletter containing practical contraceptive advice, to a long list of public libraries across Britain in 1927, and although some refused, many accepted the donation.¹³⁵ In a 1934 Summons at Bow Street police court relating to the distribution of 'indecent prints', the chairman of Bromley Public Library Committee gave evidence that comprised of 'a list of books available for borrowers in

¹³³ Laura Doan, 'Marie Stopes's wonderful rhythm charts: normalizing the natural', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 78:4 (2017), pp.595-620; Caroline Rusterholz, *Women's Medicine: Sex, family planning, and British female doctors in transnational perspective, 1920-70* (Manchester, 2020), pp.36-84.

¹³⁴ BL, W24-9611, NLB, *Catalogue of Books* (1937), frontmatter; BL PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (March 1922), p.1.

¹³⁵ Wellcome Collection (henceforth: Wellcome), Marie Stopes Papers, PP/MCS/C/49. Stopes also distributed *Birth Control News* to several university and society libraries, as well as 'Colonial' and 'Foreign' libraries outside of Britain, many of which accepted the donation.

that library which dealt with sex education.’¹³⁶ In an oral history interview, a working-class Birmingham woman June Glynn recalled her experience encountering Stopes’s books in her local library prior to marriage: ‘[...] I got the book out of the library by Dr Mary Stopes and I was reading about all the old fashioned methods of contraception [...].’¹³⁷ The NLB and other libraries also provided other services that conveyed sexual knowledge. For instance, in 1926, Dr Catherine Chisholm gave a short course of lectures at the Northern Branch of the NLB on ‘Personal Hygiene’ for women. These ‘well attended’ lectures were a feminist doctor who focused specifically on women’s health, maternity, menstruation, and sexual education for school-aged girls and young women.¹³⁸ Given her specialism, this lecture series was likely focused on providing both bodily and sexual knowledge to blind women. Public lectures more broadly were an important source of sex education. For example, similarly to the NLB’s series, Theodore Faithfull gave a series of six free lectures in 1949 in Birmingham. He covered topics from childhood sex education to the marital sexual relationship and parenthood, aimed at adolescents, parents, teachers, and religious ministers.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ *British Medical Journal*, 2:3836 (14 July 1934) pp.94-95.

¹³⁷ Library of Birmingham, Birmingham City Archives Oral History Collections, MS/2255/2/7, Millenibrum project, interview with June Glynn, p.11.

¹³⁸ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Northern Branch Annual Report (March 1926), p.6. On Dr Catherine Chisholm, see *The Lancet*, ‘Obituary: Catherine Chisholm, C.B.E., B.A., M.D. Manc., F.R.C.P.’, 260:6727 (2 August 1952), p.250; Peter D. Mohr, ‘Chisholm, Catherine (1878-1952)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). Available at: <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-46395> (Accessed: 12 July 2023).

¹³⁹ Library of Birmingham, Birmingham Local Studies Ephemera Collection, LS 4/44/39, Programme advertising six sex education lectures, 1949. On Theodore Faithfull see Avi Ohry, ‘Breaking (Old) News: A Veterinary Surgeon Became A Sexologist-Psychoanalyst. A Historical Reflection of Sexology’, *International Journal of Advanced Studies in Sexology*, 3:2 (2021), pp.80-82.

Thus the NLB was not alone in its efforts to circulate sexual knowledges, whether in books or in more ephemeral formats like pamphlets, newsletters, and lectures. Porter and Hall's argument that libraries refused advice books and kept them hidden away requires some moderation, therefore, as it is clear a number of public libraries did willingly and even actively acquire sex instruction books, including the NLB.¹⁴⁰ There is less to suggest these books were made purposefully unavailable, certainly by the 1950s as Glynn's recollections suggest, showing it was not impossible to borrow these books, even as an unmarried working-class woman. I do not argue that Porter and Hall were wrong in their implication that who could borrow these books was controlled and moderated, as the rest of this chapter will demonstrate. However, they did little to acknowledge these instances of more widespread access, and the NLB as a case study moderates this, especially as the titles were not kept separately from other literature. Placing emphasis on the NLB's position as another iteration of a public library rather than an exceptional case study changes our understanding of how, where, and to whom advice literature was available and illustrates the more pervasive presence of these books in public spaces than has previously been considered.

'Naturally we wish to give our readers what they want': Reader Demand and Agency

Librarian Bellhouse told Huntington at Putnam's Sons that blind readers had been introduced to *Married Love* by a 'notice' in the braille magazine, *Horizon*:

¹⁴⁰ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp.259, 347.

[...] recently a notice of it appeared in a Braille magazine entitled “The Horison” and readers who wished to read it were advised to approach this Library with a view to having it transcribed. Naturally, we wish to give our readers what they want [...]¹⁴¹

Horizon was one of two journals published by the National League of the Blind, a trade union organising since the 1890s to restructure blind people’s reliance on charity and make their voices heard.¹⁴² The League’s first monthly journal, *The Blind Advocate*, was printed in ink and acted as a space for propaganda, to organise members, create a sense of community, and ‘convey to its readers that they had agency and were in charge of their own fate,’ according to Reiss.¹⁴³ *Horizon* was *Advocate*’s braille counterpart, started in 1922 and fashioned as an educational publication intended to appeal to blind readers beyond its membership, circulating not much over one-hundred copies per month by the late-1920s. Both journals were a financial burden to the League, with readership limited and production costs outstripping income from their circulation.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this minor publication was where NLB readers initially came into contact with *Married Love*, leading to its inclusion in the Library. The acquisition of this book spurred the translation of further advice books, namely Stopes’s *Wise Parenthood*, requested for copying by Librarian Norah Brooks the following year.¹⁴⁵ These responses to reader demand were couched in a need to provide the blind with opportunities to match sighted

¹⁴¹ PRH MS, letter from Constance Bellhouse to G.P. Putnam’s Sons, Ltd. (19 August 1924).

¹⁴² Matthias Reiss, *Blind Workers Against Charity: The National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland, 1893-1970* (London, 2015), pp.1-2, 90; Reiss, ‘Forgotten Pioneers’, pp.133-165.

¹⁴³ Reiss, *Blind Workers Against Charity*, p. 91.

¹⁴⁴ Reiss, *Blind Workers Against Charity*, p. 92.

¹⁴⁵ PRH MS, letter from Norah Brooks to G.P. Putnam’s Sons, Ltd. (8 January 1925).

readers: ‘The blind are handicapped in many ways, and our object is to minimise that handicap as far as possible by giving them the chance of reading what their seeing brethren can read.’¹⁴⁶

These letters challenge the assumption of sexual knowledge circulation as a top-down ‘popularisation’ process. There is a sense of readers’ active participation in acquiring sex instruction books; they went to the NLB with their initial request, and those who read *Married Love* asked for further publications to be made available. Bellhouse’s insistence that the Library worked to ‘give [their] readers what they want[ed]’ implied a responsiveness to demand at the heart of the NLB’s inclusion process. Although readers still deferred to library management to make these requests, Bellhouse’s and Brooks’ willingness to facilitate them is indicative of the conversational nature of book circulation. This responsiveness was part of the NLB’s broader book acquisition process: annual reports frequently mentioned requests for transcriptions, and letters received ‘almost daily’ from readers were said to indicate the value and importance of this attentive process.¹⁴⁷ This was apparent at other libraries too, for example, at Bromley Public Library, the list of ‘sex education’ books available to readers was informed by public demand: ‘The Library Committee took account of suggestions from readers, if satisfied the desired books were proper ones.’¹⁴⁸ This corroborates the idea that the spread of sexual knowledge was far from hierarchical. However, the NLB’s emphasis on reader response and engagement suggests that if anything, the NLB’s acquisition of advice literature was *more* driven by their reader’s interests than other public libraries, in part due to the smaller community it was serving.

¹⁴⁶ PRH MS, letter from Constance Bellhouse, NLB, to G.P. Putnam’s Sons, Ltd. (19 August 1924).

¹⁴⁷ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (1919), p.7; PP.7621.na, NLB Annual Report (1922), p.4.

¹⁴⁸ *British Medical Journal*, 2:3836 (14 July 1934), p.95.

This reader engagement with the NLB in access to sexual knowledges sits in tension with historic characterisations of blind people as passive and innocent on the one hand, and sexually transgressive on the other. Debating the passage of the Blind Bill in the House of Commons in 1920, Member of Parliament Ben Tillett invoked the ‘great pity and charity’ the House should feel for the blind and spoke of the ‘darkness and torture’ of the disability.¹⁴⁹ A paternalistic attitude towards blind people formed the foundation of the state apparatus and charitable organisations for providing education and other services by the time the NLB was translating Stopes’s works. Illustrating the enduring and pervasive nature of these assumptions, into the 1940s, MO was able to collect myriad examples of blind people being referred to as ‘sensitive’, subjects of ‘pity’, and in a child-like state requiring ‘learning’ or ‘training’ to take care of themselves and participate in society.¹⁵⁰ Some blind people interviewed by MO conveyed their difficulties with navigating this portrayal: ‘[...] I’ve been helped across the road when I didn’t really want it, but I didn’t like to refuse’.¹⁵¹ Others made clear how they pushed against it: ‘When the baby came back with me from Hospital, Mrs F. said ‘Shall I wash her?’ but I said, ‘I’ll have to do it myself sometime and I might as well learn now.’ So I did it [...]’.¹⁵² Whilst pity and paternalism largely defined the state and public response to blindness, MO reported that much of the British population was intent that blind people needed to be—and could be— independent.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ House of Commons Debate, 12 March 1920, Hansard, Volume 126, Columns 1695-1739.

¹⁵⁰ MOA, FR 2536 ‘Charity and the Blind’ (November 1947), pp.51-52.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p.55.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid, pp.7-8.

Blindness has typically featured in histories of sex as resulting from sexual transgression and venereal disease.¹⁵⁴ Source material often supports these readings. For example, five per cent of those MO asked what they thought the cause of blindness was said ‘venereal disease’, with one respondent saying: ‘Well, I should think a lot of it is caused through sexual disease. Probably other diseases in the parents.’¹⁵⁵ Although associations between blindness and sexual transgression were perhaps less prevalent by the twentieth century than assumptions of innocence and incapacity, it is nevertheless important to recognise how readers’ requests for advice literature through the NLB demonstrates their active participation in accessing sexual knowledge beyond both of these contradictory assumptions. The readers’ requests to the NLB therefore demonstrate the tension between the cultural construction of blindness and blind people’s agency, highlighting the unstable position the NLB occupied as an institution that elicited sympathy for the blind whilst simultaneously promoting their intelligence, independence, and value to society. Sex instruction books were not made available as an imposition on the blind by sighted authorities, but primarily through demand from readers themselves, despite the NLB operating in a cultural context which frequently diminished the agency and personhood of blind people.

Sexual Knowledge in the ‘wrong hands’: Respectability Politics and Advice in the Library

The presence of agency sat against a backdrop of respectability politics. Bellhouse had reassured the publisher of *Married Love* that the braille edition would not be ‘issued to all and sundry’ with readers—of whom the Library had ‘an intimate knowledge’—carefully monitored:

¹⁵⁴ Warne, ‘Between the Sheets’, pp.1-9; Stephens, ‘Sex as a normalising technology’, pp.271-272.

¹⁵⁵ MOA, FR 2536 ‘Charity and the Blind’ (November 1947), pp.35.

‘we [...] should guard against any chance of this book getting into the wrong hands, but we have a number of thoughtful, educated readers and these are the ones likely to ask for the book.’¹⁵⁶ Reader monitoring and management ensured demand for the books met expectations of suitable, responsible audiences for sexual knowledges. With these knowledges occupying a middle ground of culture where it was simultaneously respectable and potentially dangerous in the wrong hands, the Library anticipated resistance to their request, pre-empting objections from the publisher. Constant Huntington, who corresponded with Bellhouse on behalf of the publisher, only had concerns as to whether a braille copy produced by the NLB would diminish their potential profits should they want to produce a tactile version in the future, whilst Stopes, when asked, did not seem bothered by the possibility: ‘Please do whatever you think right—I’ll leave it entirely to you.’¹⁵⁷

As a librarian, Bellhouse’s anticipatory navigation of anxieties around the sharing of sexual knowledges is unsurprising. The public library remained a site of ongoing cultural conflict; as an increasingly feminised space and the preserve of middle-class values in the 1920s and 1930s, imposing notions of respectability and serious reading on a user base that hailed from across the class spectrum was an important part of their negotiation of such tensions.¹⁵⁸ To do so, for instance, the NLB often emphasised the educational value of their books and other services that

¹⁵⁶ PRH MS, letter from Constance Bellhouse to G.P. Putnam’s Sons, Ltd. (19 August 1924).

¹⁵⁷ PRH MS, letter from Constant Huntington to Marie Stopes (14 August 1924); letter from Constant Huntington to Constance Bellhouse (18 August 1924); note from Marie Stopes on letter from Constant Huntington to Marie Stopes (14 August 1924).

¹⁵⁸ Alistair Black, ‘The past public library observed: user perceptions and recollections of the twentieth-century British public library recorded in the Mass-Observation archive’, *Library Quarterly*, 76:4 (2006), p.440; Black, ‘False Optimism’, pp.208-209; Michelle Johansen, ‘“The supposed paradise of pen and ink”: self-education and social mobility in the London public library (1880-1930)’, *Cultural and Social History*, 16:1 (2019), pp.47-65.

justified the organisation as of great ‘usefulness’ to the blind community.¹⁵⁹ As Christopher Hilliard has argued, libraries desired to primarily serve ‘intelligent’ readers with ‘edifying books’ congruent with middlebrow reading tastes, but pressure to secure funding necessitated much more ephemeral book lists that satisfied a range of reading tastes, including lowbrow fiction.¹⁶⁰

Furthermore, from its inception, the public library was both physically and culturally designed for readers’ habits to be monitored, even if they could freely request or browse books.¹⁶¹ Stopes’s advice books were held in Birmingham Central Libraries in the reference department to be used in the library space where readers could be monitored, although no evidence remains of the lending library catalogues to suggest these books could have been taken home as well.¹⁶² As Bob Duckett has argued, catalogues for reference and lending libraries ‘represent a rich bibliographical heritage, much of which has now disappeared’, yet what remains of the Birmingham catalogues gestures towards the availability and accessibility of advice literature within public libraries, at least in monitored spaces.¹⁶³ Thus as with the NLB, the agency of readers could only be realised within certain bounds, with the library authorities invoking propriety and ensuring the ability to monitor readers both during book acquisition and the reading process. Other academic interventions on public libraries during this period show

¹⁵⁹ BL, P.P.7614.ak, NLB Northern Branch Annual Report (1924), pp.5-7.

¹⁶⁰ Christopher Hilliard, ‘The Twopenny Library: The Book Trade, Working-Class Readers, and ‘Middlebrow’ Novels in Britain, 1930-42’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25:2 (2014), p.212.

¹⁶¹ Black, ‘Everton public library’, pp.43-44.

¹⁶² BCC, Birmingham Reference Library Names Catalogue, 1879-1962, microfiche cards 285 and 237. On the differences between reference and lending libraries

¹⁶³ Duckett, ‘High seriousness’, p.57.

librarians strongly dictating which books appeared on the shelves, proving this surveillance was not uncharacteristic.¹⁶⁴

This is illustrative of the indeterminate position both physically and culturally that advice books occupied, especially in public settings. Considerable concern existed amongst some authorities that for the ‘wrong’ audience, sexual advice could be dangerous or corrupting. Malcolm Hilbery—King’s Counsel in the Bow Street case—summarised this tension, stating it was not the subject of a publication but how it was treated that was important. He asked:

[...] what the man of ordinary intelligence expected on reading something of this sort.

The book, a bulky volume of fairly high price, was not intended for the prurient, but simply for the reasonable information of the public on a subject of high concern. It was impossible, of course, to approach such a topic without plain speaking, but while such an approach was distasteful it need not be indecent.¹⁶⁵

The fine line between respectability and indecency that advice literature balanced on was defined by its intended audience, its potential effects, and the price it was sold at. As a site for distributing private sexual knowledge of public importance, it became paradoxically ‘distasteful’ but legitimate. That bulky, high-priced volumes intended for the ‘right’ audience rendered sexual knowledge acceptable in the public realm hinted towards wider cultural tensions about reading habits.

¹⁶⁴ Hammond, *Reading*, p.45.

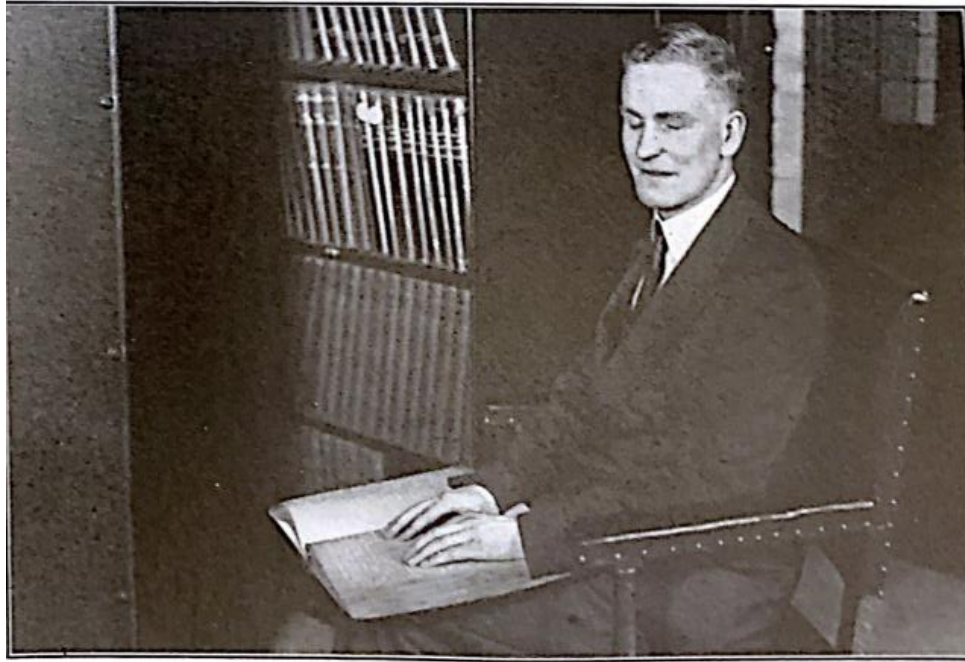
¹⁶⁵ *British Medical Journal*, 2:3836 (14 July 1934), p.94.

The NLB was constantly trying to prove the respectability and cultural capital of its users' interests: 'It is encouraging to find how sincere is the appreciation of fine literature from unexpected quarters, and how widespread is the eagerness to be supplied with real books.'¹⁶⁶ Inserting advice literature into this broader debate about the value of different books, its distribution by the NLB rendered access to sexual knowledge as part of the everyday but simultaneously a moral and cultural problem in need of careful management. Reflecting on this, framing advice books as only repressed and furtively distributed through the NLB or the wider public library service is overly simplistic, but so would be positioning them as free of cultural taboos and censorship either. The instability of sexual knowledges as they were moved by historical actors into new spaces and presented to new audiences is apparent through this.

Getting In Touch: Embodiment, Transformation, the Self, and Eugenics

Images of readers in the NLB's annual reports emphasised the relationship between body and book:

¹⁶⁶ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (1922), p.13.



A Good Story.

Image 3 A blind reader with braille book, March 1938.¹⁶⁷

Feeling the words, the man sat amongst the shelves in the library and read with his fingertips, using touch to navigate the raised bumps of braille type upon the page. His hands were the primary mode through which the story is accessible, making tactility a fundamental part of the embodied process of reading. Koole's argument that tactility changed people's relationship with their bodies and the world around them is even more apt in this context than in encounters with print books.¹⁶⁸ Whilst interactions with books in the department store or bookshop were shaped by touch and sight as complementary senses, braille reading necessarily privileged tactility. The relationship between the language used to discuss blindness, reading, and the relationship between body, mind, and self in the context of the NLB is significant because it gestures towards

¹⁶⁷ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (1938), p.17.

¹⁶⁸ Koole, 'Nervous hands'.

the multiple meanings sexual advice literature held when circulated and consumed within and through this space.

Descriptions of the Library's services centred touch in a figurative sense: readers were 'enabled to get into close touch with the best authors', and the service provided 'food for the minds of those whose handicap in life makes it difficult for them to get in touch with the great minds of the past or with the vital movements of the present.'¹⁶⁹ Implicitly connecting touch to education, the Library's focus was on minimising the impacts of visual impairment on the intellectual capabilities of readers. As Bellhouse relayed in her letter to Stopes's publisher, they wanted to provide the same opportunities as sighted readers had, thus giving them the chance to access 'one of the most valuable [books] in the English language.'¹⁷⁰ Verstraete and Söderfeldt have noted that touch had an important role in blind education yet has often been seen as a substitute for the 'higher' sense of sight, and played a 'subordinate role[s] in the relationship between knowledge and the senses.'¹⁷¹ NLB users themselves also framed touch as a substitute, and ultimately a tool to achieve the equivalent of sight. For example, an ex-soldier explained:

When I *feel* blind I pick up a book, and if I stick to it and concentrate I begin to lose remembrance and live in the story and among its people. *It is more like seeing the world than anything else I do.*¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (1922), p.13; NLB Northern Branch Annual Report (1926), p.9.

¹⁷⁰ PRH, MS, letter from Constance Bellhouse to G.P. Putnam's Sons, Ltd. (19 August 1924).

¹⁷¹ Verstraete and Söderfeldt, 'Deaf-Blindness', pp.265-266.

¹⁷² BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (1919), p.11. Emphasis original.

He suggested that touch could imitate sight, allowing him to escape the *feeling* of blindness and access a higher experience through his hands and fingers. Similarly, another Library user wondered: ‘When we read, we think we see. [...] How did the blind live in the terrible night before they had books they could read?’¹⁷³ In these understandings, then, being blind was a loss that could be adjusted for by employing a subordinate sense to craft a relationship with knowledge through reading.

Education, learning, or training were thus constructed as a transformative tool for achieving blind people’s independence and ultimately citizenship. The NLB Committee illustrated this connection clearly in their 1926 report:

The sick-bed and the arm-chair are no longer a prison to the man who has a book; he is free of the company of the immortals, a citizen of the greatest of all cities upon whose dominion the sun of sympathy will never set.¹⁷⁴

Steeped in imperial and gendered language, the notion that reading facilitated freedom from the imprisonment of the disabled body, opening up the possibilities of citizenship, was fundamental to the claims the Library was making about the purpose and experience of tactile reading. Taking on phrasing (‘on which the sun never sets’) commonly used to describe the reach of the British Empire, the transformative role of reading is explicitly associated with ideas of nation

¹⁷³ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Annual Report (1931), p.8.

¹⁷⁴ BL, PP.7612.na, NLB Report (1926), p.14. There is no reference provided for this quotation in the report and I have been unable to trace its origins, although it takes a similar tone to other texts discussing the relationship between books and readers from the early-twentieth century, for example: Frederick Rowland Marvin, *The Companionship of Books And Other Papers* (New York/London, 1905), pp.1-22.

and citizenship and civilization.¹⁷⁵ Similar connections appeared in wider discussions of blindness and reading. For instance, Arthur Pearson, a publisher and author blinded by glaucoma, wrote that sight ‘is the ruler of the senses [...] hearing, smell, and touch are but little called upon [...]. The savage hears, smells and feels his way through the trackless forests in the dark [...].’¹⁷⁶ Associations between vision and civilization are evident here, whilst the other senses were rendered the domain of the primitive ‘Other’. Thus the role of reading in the transformation of the disabled mind and body is pervasive.

Alongside overcoming disability, self-transformation and the achievement of an explicitly masculine citizenship was an important aspect of the framing of much work done by charitable and benevolent organisations for disabled people, including the blind. Disabled people were often denied the full rights of citizenship, and education and training was conceptualised as a route to achieving a limited form of it. For instance, Seth Koven, discussing the discursive relationships between ‘crippled’ children and soldiers in Britain, noted that from the 1890s, the notion of disability as something people could be taught to overcome in order to elevate their status from ‘dependents’ to future ‘citizens’ was pervasive. This was developing alongside the idea that the disabled body was often constructed not innate, and thus it could be remade.¹⁷⁷ Just like the ‘crippled’ body, with education and training, the blind person could be made to ‘see’ through touch and thus achieve citizenship, playing into what Kirsti Bohata et al have

¹⁷⁵ Norman Vance, ‘Imperial Rome and Britain’s language of empire, 1600-1837’, *History of European Ideas* 26:3 (2000), p.213.

¹⁷⁶ Arthur Pearson, *Victory Over Blindness: How It Was Won By The Men Of St. Dunstan’s and How Others May Win It* (London, 1919), pp.73-74.

¹⁷⁷ Seth Koven, ‘Remembering and Dismemberment: Crippled Children, Wounded Soldiers, and the Great War in Great Britain’, *American Historical Review*, 99:4 (1994), pp.1172-1175.

termed the ‘overcoming’ trope.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, Ana Carden-Coyne has argued that St. Dunstan’s Hostel for Blind Soldiers and Sailors, a rehabilitation institution that was closely associated with the NLB, encouraged a heroic, masculine image of ‘restoration’ and the ‘self-transformation of the disabled’ whereby blinded veterans could become useful citizens again through training and education.¹⁷⁹ War ravaged the body and injuries constituted a loss of masculinity and thus full citizenship, whilst work and education was the means through which the body could be rendered useful and a form of citizenship restored.¹⁸⁰ Touch and tactile reading, therefore, were not only conceptualised as an alternative way for blind people to experience sight, but were also part of a wider narrative of the transformation of the disabled body for access to citizenship.

Importantly, these library reports were intended for sighted authorities and officials including patrons and funders, and thus they conveyed a particular image of the institution and its management’s attitudes towards readers and reading.¹⁸¹ As Mark Paterson has argued, many sources discussing the experiences of blind people were for sighted individuals and authorities, intended to elicit sympathy and feed a fascination with representations of visual impairment centring on what blind people could ‘see’.¹⁸² Moreover, representations of public libraries and reading as transformative were not constrained to the NLB. In MOs reporting, some respondents recalled how libraries had shaped and changed their lives.¹⁸³ The public library

¹⁷⁸ Kirsti Bohata, Alexandra Jones, Mike Martin, and Steven Thompson, *Disability in industrial Britain: A cultural and literary history of impairment in the coal industry, 1880-1948* (Manchester, 2020), p.41.

¹⁷⁹ Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body*, p.168.

¹⁸⁰ Koven, ‘Remembering and Dismemberment’, pp.1171, 1188.

¹⁸¹ Hammond, *Reading*, p.33.

¹⁸² Mark Paterson, “‘Looking on darkness, which the blind do see’”: blindness, empathy, and feeling seeing’, *Mosaic*, 46:3 (2013), pp.150-177.

¹⁸³ Black, ‘The past public library’, pp.448-449.

project began with a moral impetus informed by the notion of self-help as congruent with the betterment of society; reading was a form of cultural capital that aided self-improvement and built character.¹⁸⁴ However, the force with which this conceptualisation is represented in testimony from the NLB makes it a significant part of how this particular library fashioned its relationship with its users and the role it had in British society, even if not fully representative of blind people's experiences themselves.

What, then, was the role of advice literature—and thus sexual knowledges—in 'overcoming' disability, transforming the embodied and mental self, and attaining citizenship in the context of the NLB? These texts employed the language of the transformation of the self through education in extremely similar ways to the NLB did on a broader scale. In *Married Love*, Stopes asserted: 'Is not instinct enough? The answer is No, Instinct is *not* enough. In every other human activity it has been realised that training, the handing on of tradition are essential.'¹⁸⁵ Similarly, Wright's *Sex Factor* asserted that people should 'learn how to make sexual intercourse harmonious', as if they do not, 'want of knowledge' would cause 'complications' to arise.¹⁸⁶ Sexual self-help normalised sexual intimacies and supported marriage as the foundation of society. As Matthew Lavine has detailed, in the United States of America, sex advice by the 1930s was defined by the idea that sexual intercourse was learned, not innate, something to be mastered 'do-it-yourself' style handbooks.¹⁸⁷ Similarly, with the British public library as a space for self-help and the betterment of society, the role of sexual knowledges emerged as propping up normative sexual behaviour and heterosexual relationships as a pillar of social cohesion,

¹⁸⁴ Hammond, *Reading*, pp.48-50.

¹⁸⁵ Stopes, *Married Love*, p.xvi. Emphasis original.

¹⁸⁶ Wright, *Sex Factor*, pp.10-11.

¹⁸⁷ Matthew Lavine, "'Advanced Marriage Technique': Sex as a Perfectible Skill in Mid-twentieth-century American Marriage Manuals', *Journal of Family History*, 46:4 (2021), p.461.

making it a precursor to the more widespread establishment of post-war sex therapy and marriage counselling.¹⁸⁸

The anxieties surrounding managing and normalising sexual behaviour were particularly acute in relation to disability generally and blindness specifically for eugenic reasons, offering some explanation as to why the NLB supplied such literature beyond the desire to meet reader demand. The aforementioned cultural associations between blindness, venereal disease, and sexual transgression put the NLB in a difficult position with the supply of advice literature for blind readers. Eugenicist tropes that diminished the capacity and usefulness of disabled people in the context of a society that required only those of high physical, mental, and racial ‘quality’ to strengthen the nation state were pervasive.¹⁸⁹ Significantly, British eugenicists saw the birth of disabled children as dangerous. At the First International Eugenics Congress held in London in 1912, ‘those having defective sense organs, such as the blind and the deaf’ were included in a list of ‘classes’ to be ‘eliminated from the human stock’.¹⁹⁰ Physical impairments including blindness, whilst eliciting pity from much of the population, were simultaneously seen as a risk to racial and national strength.

¹⁸⁸ Teri Chettiar, ‘Treating marriage as ‘the sick entity’: gender, emotional life, and the psychology of marriage improvement in postwar Britain’, *History of Psychology*, 18:3 (2015), pp.270-282; Teri Chettiar, ‘“More than a contract”: the emergence of a state-supported marriage welfare service and the politics of emotional life in post-1945 Britain’, *The Journal of British Studies*, 55:3 (2016), pp.566-591.

¹⁸⁹ Michael Rembis, ‘Disability and the history of eugenics’ in Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen, (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History* (Oxford, 2018), pp.85-104.

¹⁹⁰ Wellcome, Eugenics Society, SA/EUG/B.5, ‘The Regeneration of Our Race. A Summary of the First International Eugenics Congress—Weighty Words’, *Health and Strength* (10 August 1912).

Despite these common connections, it is difficult to ascertain the relationship between the NLB and eugenics specifically. None of the patrons or committee members of the Central or Northern Branches of the Library appear to have been known eugenicists or members of prominent eugenics organisations. Despite this, a distaste towards the marital and reproductive lives of people born with conditions causing visual impairment was part of the fabric of British eugenics that, as it was so pervasive in the interwar years, likely influenced broader attitudes to blind people's sexual lives including in the work of the NLB. Some of the advice literature supplied was written by eugenicists—Stopes's *Married Love* and *Wise Parenthood* being the obvious examples—whilst the Library also held works and biographies of prominent Neo-Malthusians like Annie Besant.¹⁹¹ Although it is difficult to establish a clear link to eugenics as a motivation for circulating advice literature, it must be understood as part of this history, nevertheless. Sexual advice was inherently bound to ableist, racist assumptions about bodies, and the relationship between the two in this context is immutable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates how access to advice literature in public contexts—whether the department store, a bookshop, or a public library—was part of the development of a sexual culture that was simultaneously public and private, made up of fleeting moments of encounter with developing popular sexual knowledges. This access was facilitated in and through different spaces and senses, the experience of which was mediated not only by gender, class, and disability, but also by cultural anxieties around respectability and sexual knowledge.

¹⁹¹ Robert A. Peel, *Marie Stopes, Eugenics and the English Birth Control Movement: Proceedings of a Conference by the Galton Institute, London, 1996* (London, 1997); BL, W24-9611, NLB, *Catalogue of Books* (1937), pp.59-60.

Historians have paid insufficient attention to the embodied and spatial when discussing the processes of circulation and encounter in the diffusion of sexual knowledges.

To take up Doan's challenge of stepping 'outside the logic of popularisation', this chapter has argued for a more nuanced view of how popular sexual knowledges were spread that foregrounds the phenomenological and asks exactly how, where, and why people came into contact with books containing information about sex and bodies.¹⁹² In doing so, I have argued that advice literature occupied an uneasy middle ground or 'grey zone' of sexual culture—that can be spatially and geographically located within Britain's retail spaces and libraries—in which it was both respectable and salacious. To do so, this chapter has pieced together a patchwork of archival material from disparate sources, reading between the lines to gain a more complete sense of what access was and what it meant. This builds on current scholarship to demonstrate that investigating the concept of access in more depth allows us to build a more clear picture of the position and meanings of advice literature in British sexual culture in the interwar and post-war periods.

¹⁹² Doan, 'Popularization', *Gender & History*, p.311.

CHAPTER FOUR

ACCESSING SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE IN IRELAND

Advertising Sexual Knowledges: Pulp Fiction Magazines in the Irish Free State

In the 1930s, when Selfridges and Harrods in London were displaying marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice books on their shelves for browsing, sexual knowledge appeared in shops in the Irish Free State (IFS) in a different way. Scattered complaints to the Dublin-based Censorship of Publications Board from across the decade allude to a story about the spread of sexual knowledge in this context through cheap American publications containing advertisements for advice books, in which Woolworth's stores were an important setting. LE wrote from Cork in 1936, giving details of an advertisement found in *George Bruce's Squadron*, a 'pulp' magazine:

I take the liberty of forwarding for your attention an advertisement [...] The reverse of the page contains even more obscene references. The magazine was purchased at Woolworths Stores, Cork on 5th instant where similar books are being sold in large quantities.¹

The Board—established under the Free State and convened in January 1930 to control the spread of 'indecent' material—received many letters complaining about literature from the

¹ National Archives of Ireland, Department of Justice Papers (henceforth: NAI JUS) NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from LE to Éamon De Valera (6 December 1936).

United States of America.² Pulp titles such as *Squadron* appear again and again, part of a genre of cheap wood-pulp printed magazines associated with sensationalist, formulaic stories, contrasting the more expensive ‘slick’ publications.³ Running between August 1933 and June 1934, *Squadron* was one of a range of military-based magazines produced by Adventure House, and the April 1934 issue reported by LE retailed in the United States for fifteen cents, making it affordable to many.⁴ The advertisement enclosed with the letter was for Dr Herman Harold Rubin’s *Eugenics and Sex Harmony: The Sexes, Their Relations and Problems* (1933). Interestingly, the title had been altered to *Sex Harmony and Eugenics* for the advertisement, emphasising the contents as an exciting discussion of sex for the magazine reader, rather than a eugenicist tract focused on population control, which it primarily was.⁵

LE’s letter was one of a handful flagging advertisements for this book and other advice literature across the decade in a range of pulp magazines and novels. For instance, two years earlier, PK reported an advertisement for Rubin’s book in ‘nearly all American novels’ sold in Woolworth’s in Kilkenny: ‘All the stories I read are clean nothing immoral in them, it is terrible to have to fall into the hands of the youths.’⁶ He wrote again in 1939, stating that he had found ‘immoral’

² Anthony Keating, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Censorship: God, Ireland and the Battle to Extend Censorship Post 1929’, *Estudios Irlandeses*, 9 (2014), p.70; Donal Ó Drisceoil, ‘The best banned in the land’: Censorship and Irish Writing since 1950’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 35 (2005), pp.146-149.

³ David M. Earle, ‘Conrad Under Wraps: Reputation, Pulp Indeterminacy, and the 1950 Signet Edition of *Heart of Darkness*’, *Studia Neophilologica*, 85:1 (2013), pp.41-44.

⁴ Phil Stephensen-Payne, ‘The Adventure, War, and Espionage Fiction Magazine Index: George Bruce’s *Squadron*, Contents Lists’, *Galactic Central*. Available at: <http://www.philsp.com/homeville/afi/k00090.htm#A5> (Accessed: 9 December 2021); Adventure House Inc., *George Bruce’s Squadron*, 2:4 (April 1934).

⁵ NAI JUS 90/102/28 cutting from Adventure House Inc., *George Bruce’s Squadron*, 2:4 (April 1934); Herman Harold Rubin, *Eugenics and Sex Harmony: The Sexes, Their Relations and Problems* (New York, 1933).

⁶ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from PK to Mr Derrig (18 December 1934); letter from Mr Derrig to PK (31 December 1934).

advertisements in ‘six or seven’ of the ‘10 cent novels’ he had picked up in Woolworth’s in the parish of St Mary’s.⁷ Further versions of the advertisement for this and similar books were reported on separate occasions in *Gang World* and *Star Detective* magazines sold in Dublin.⁸ Like *Squadron*, *Gang World* was one of the first gangster pulps published between 1930 and 1934, retailing for between fifteen and twenty cent in the American market, and *Star Detective* was a crime detective pulp that ran between 1935 and 1937.⁹ Woolworth’s, beginning in Pennsylvania in 1879, opened their first English locations in 1909, and went on to establish their first Irish store on Dublin’s prestigious Grafton Street in 1914.¹⁰ Whilst historians such as Roy Porter and Lesley Hall have briefly acknowledged Woolworth’s as a location where American magazines advertising and discussing sex were available in Britain, there has been little work to detail its specific significance as a location for accessing ideas about sex, bodies, and desires, particularly in the Irish context.¹¹

Within this handful of letters, a picture of moments of encounter in Woolworth’s shops between Irish people and advertising for sex instruction books is elucidated. Configuring advertising as a mode of access to ideas about sex, bodies, and desires, the letters open up possibilities for reconsidering dominant narratives of sexual knowledge in histories of sex in Ireland and beyond

⁷ NAI JUS 90/102/138, letter from PK to Minister of Justice (6 June 1939).

⁸ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from TP to Seán Lemass (11 August 1934); NAI JUS 90/102/138, anonymous letter (undated, circa 1939).

⁹ Michael L. Cook and Stephen T. Miller, (eds), *Mystery, Detective, and Espionage Fiction: A Checklist of Fiction in U.S. Pulp Magazines, 1915-1974* (New York, 1988), pp.359-362, 549; Phil Stephensen-Payne, ‘Gang World’, *Galactic Central*. Available at: http://www.philsp.com/mags/gang_world.html (Accessed: 9 December 2021).

¹⁰ Barbara Walsh, ‘Chain store retailing in Ireland: a case study of F.W. Woolworth & Co. Ltd., 1914-2008’, *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 6:1 (2014), p.99; Karen Plunkett-Powell, *Remembering Woolworth’s: A Nostalgic History of the World’s Most Famous Five-and-Dime* (New York, 1999), pp.110-111.

¹¹ Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven, 1995), p.258.

that have centred repression.¹² As Maria Luddy has argued, the 1920s and 1930s saw considerable discussion of sex in a number of different contexts.¹³ The diffusion of discussions of sex and sexual knowledges through advertising in this period has been the subject of some academic interventions, for example, in relation to newspaper advertising originating from Britain and the circulation of family planning and abortifacient information through this medium.¹⁴ However, the advertising of advice literature—in cheap American magazines in Woolworth’s in particular, but also more broadly—has not yet been studied in depth, despite providing a revealing site for examining the complex, variable circulation of instruction books that nuances understandings of access to sexual knowledges in the Free State and the Republic of Ireland (ROI).

This chapter’s starting point is therefore stepping beyond histories in this context that foreground what was not accessible, to focus on what *was*. It explores the porosity of national borders—established here through the apparatus of censorship—when confronted with realities of transnational forms of consumer culture, including retail spaces, publishing, and advertising. Recognising the interconnectedness of Ireland, Britain, and the United States in the context of the circulation of sexual knowledges through advertising especially takes seriously the more ephemeral, less obvious ways in and through which people encountered emerging ideas about

¹² Michael Cronin, *Impure Thoughts: Sexuality, Catholicism and Literature in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Manchester, 2012); Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Sexuality in Modern Ireland* (London, 2009); Chrystal Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland* (London, 1999); Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 1987).

¹³ Maria Luddy, ‘Marriage, Sexuality and the Law in Ireland’ in Eugenio Biagini and Mary Daly, (eds), *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (New York, 2017), p.359.

¹⁴ Mark O’Brien, ‘Policing the press: censorship, family planning, and the press in Ireland, 1929–67’, *Irish Studies Review*, 29:1 (2021), pp.15-30; Stephanie Rains, “‘No irregularity or obstruction can resist them’”: advertising of abortion pills in the Irish press, 1890-1930’, *Irish Studies Review*, 29:4 (2021), pp.407-424.

sex, bodies, and desires. This complicates our conceptualisation of the circulation of such knowledges by showing the importance and necessity of seeing the British example foregrounded in the previous chapters of this thesis as part of a web of moving people, publications, and ideas working in conjunction with other national contexts. In doing so, it shows how the life cycle of advice literature and its contents, whilst produced within and aimed at nationally specific audiences as shown in Chapters One and Two, is emblematic of the ways in which consumer culture sustained the movement of knowledges and ideas both directly and indirectly through networks of retailing and letter-writing that reached communities beyond those intended. Through this, the cultural and individual relevance and meaning of advice literature, the knowledges it contained, and how it was encountered is elucidated.

Chapter Four therefore examines the circulation of and access to sexual knowledges in Ireland, with a particular focus on advertising and the marketing of sexual advice. First, I explore the censorship apparatus of the Irish state across the 1930s to 1950s to examine the scope and limitations of attempts to censor sexual knowledges in print publications. I demonstrate that whilst censorship was widespread and many forms of sexual content were in theory banned, the shortcomings and complexities of the censorship process meant that loopholes existed for Irish people to access banned literature. Moreover, even where publications themselves could not be accessed, lists of banned books printed in newspapers and advertising of new titles released by publishers provided limited information about publications, thus demonstrating the significance of advertising as a mediated form of access to advice literature and subsequently sexual knowledges.

Following this, I explore the pulp genre's readership in the Ireland suggesting that these widely available magazines were an important form of limited access to emerging discourses surrounding sex, bodies, and desires for working-class men and women in particular, set against a backdrop of the cultural significance of 'Americanisation'. The genre's popularity spurred anxieties, especially amongst religious and nationalist circles, with newspaper reports expressing concern at reading habits and complaints to the Censorship Board illustrating the cultural significance of sexual knowledges being circulated within and through this format. Moreover, accessible stores like Woolworth's as a location in which encounters between readers and advice literature advertisements happened continues to contextualise the readership for these magazines and thus advertisements, demonstrating what it meant to access them in this specific space. I then ask what exactly readers could understand about sex, bodies, and desires from their encounters with advice literature advertising. Analysing advertisements for American advice books reported to the Censorship Board, I argue that readers of pulp magazines were faced with fantasies of the American sexual ideal that heavily emphasised eugenicist thought, marketed to create intrigue around sexual knowledge and encourage consumption of published advice. It is important to note, however, that advertisements were often veiled and euphemistic with audiences only given limited information that they had to interpret, thus this advertising was not a straightforward mode of access.

Developing this, I consider print and lecture-based advertisements for American brand menstrual products aimed at middle-class and working-class women in the 1950s, arguing that this case study demonstrates how the marketing of products related to the body and its reproductive functions could be more direct. Supplying practical information about the body, these forms of advertising diverge from the earlier marketing of sex instruction books in pulp

magazines that focused on fantasy and sensationalism over tangible advice. In doing so, this chapter develops current literature on the marketing and advertising of sexual advice books and knowledges more broadly to demonstrate that being attentive to more subtle, complex forms of access and the ways in which it was established through the movement of consumer culture across national borders nuances our understanding of the landscape of sexual knowledge circulation across the twentieth century. In doing so, this chapter connects three national contexts—Ireland, Britain, and the United States—to elucidate the landscape of sexual knowledge circulation, and the role that mass consumption and the movement of advice books within and through transnational commercial markets played in the establishment of varied yet connected sexual cultures in the twentieth century.

‘What are our Censors doing?’: The Scope and Limitations of Censoring Sex

In 1939, when TP wrote to Seán Lemass, the Minister for Industry and Commerce, complaining about the advertisement of a sex instruction book in *Gang World* that he had purchased in Woolworth’s, he questioned: ‘Do they not make terrible reading? What are our Censors doing?’¹⁵ Drawing attention to the perceived ineffectiveness of the censorship process, TP made a plea to the Minister that suggested frustration with the State’s inability to prevent obscene or immoral content from circulating. Averill Earles has argued that ‘In effect, sexual knowledge was banned in Ireland.’¹⁶ The 1929 Censorship of Publications Act had *effectively* banned all books and publications considered ‘indecent or obscene or advocates the unnatural

¹⁵ NAI JUS 90/102/28 letter from TP to Seán Lemass (11th August 1934).

¹⁶ Averill Earles, ‘Explicit: Censorship, Sexology, and Sexuality in Independent Ireland’, *Nursing Clio* (13 February 2018). Available at: <https://nursingclio.org/2018/02/13/explicit-censorship-sexology-and-sexuality-in-independent-ireland/> (Accessed: 14 July 2023).

prevention of conception or the procurement of abortion or miscarriage' after 'several issues' committing an offence.¹⁷ It had a clear remit, applicable to all publications that contained pornographic material, discussions of sexuality, content considered sexually immoral, or the advertising or promoting of contraceptive or marital advice.¹⁸

Censorship legislation was built upon a complex relationship between the Government, the Catholic Church, and conceptualisations of a uniquely Irish sexuality. As Lindsey Earner-Byrne has written, in the twentieth century, a 'stringent moral code' enforced and reinforced by the State, Catholic Church, and legal system sought to dictate sexual conduct, especially amongst women, whose sexuality was culturally constructed as dangerous.¹⁹ Censorship was one manifestation of the regulation of sex, sexuality, and gender roles in a religious regime that emphasised centrality of the patriarchal family, seeking to enforce ideals of sexual purity and conformity amongst Irish citizens.²⁰ In the Free State period in particular, this was born out of Irish Catholicism's theological underpinning. Anthony Keating has shown that the Church took a paternalistic attitude towards Irish people as 'children' in need of 'guidance by both church and Nationalist ideologues' to achieve their unique potential to fulfil 'God's mission', something particularly under attack from 'foreign vice', including imported publications.²¹ Promoting conservative ideals of sexuality, censorship was therefore an apparatus through

¹⁷ Censorship of Publications Act 1929, Part II, Sections 6.1 and 7.1.

¹⁸ Keating, 'The Uses and Abuses of Censorship', p.70.

¹⁹ Lindsey Earner-Byrne, 'The Rape of Mary M.: A Microhistory of Sexual Violence and Moral Redemption in 1920s Ireland', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 24:1 (2015), p.77.

²⁰ Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart, 'Gender Roles in Ireland since 1740' in Eugenio Biagini and Mary Daly, (eds), *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (New York, 2017), pp.312-326.

²¹ Anthony Keating, 'Censorship, The Cornerstone of Catholic Ireland', *Journal of Church and State*, 57:2 (2013), pp.289-290.

which the State and Church in conjunction could exercise authority over citizens in order to fulfil religious and nationalist expectations.

The scale of what was banned is evidenced in contemporary newspaper reports. For instance, in May 1934, the *Evening Herald* reported that in just over four years of operation, the Board had banned 408 books and 30 periodicals by March of that year.²² Large numbers of books that contained information about sex, bodies, and desires, both fiction and non-fiction, were prohibited. In the first list of banned publications produced in May 1930, ten out of thirteen were about birth control, including a number of American activist Margaret Sanger's publications, books by Marie Stopes, and the work of other 'sex experts'.²³ In theory denying Irish citizens access to anything that could be identified as discussing sex, new titles were added to the list constantly.²⁴ However, the tension between what was banned in theory and what publications were available in reality is gestured towards in TP's letter. State censorship could mediate the circulation material dealing with sex, but access was never completely prevented in all formats.

There is substantial evidence of where the purview of the censor did not reach or where interventions were ineffective. In 1939, the *Irish Independent* drew attention to the perceived problem of the increasing mass production of popular fiction and 'books dealing with science, history, and sociology, and other subjects not usually published in cheap editions [...] which

²² *Evening Herald*, '400 Books Banned In 4 Years', (23 May 1934), p.6.

²³ *Manchester Guardian*, 'Irish Censorship. First List of Banned Books.' (14 May 1930), p.11; O'Brien, 'Policing the press', p.20.

²⁴ Earles, 'Explicit'.

were not fit for reading by the general public.’²⁵ The claim made was that the cheap format and mass production made these harmful texts widely available. The increasing volume of books, periodicals, magazines, and newspapers produced as the twentieth century went on made it impossible for the Board to seek out and act on every offence. In the same newspaper report, it was stated that only six per cent of books banned were listed in the *Iris Oifigiuil* (the official State gazette where the 1929 Act specified all banned books should be listed) within three months of their date of publication, and forty-one per cent within a year.²⁶ Thinking more specifically about sexological texts, even if they were not always available in cheap editions, there were still a large number of these books being circulated. AJM, writing to the Board in 1941, asked whether any of six listed advice books on sex and family planning were banned.²⁷ The government official’s response indicated that just one out of the six was prohibited at the time of writing; *The Technique of Sex* by Anthony Havil was banned on the 11th September 1940.²⁸ The sheer volume of books, periodicals, magazines, and newspapers produced and imported at increasingly accessible prices to the Free State made it impossible for the Board to seek out and act on every supposed offence.

The impossibility of rooting out every instance of offensive material was compounded by the operational structure of the Board, which was complex and lengthy. In basic terms, according to the 1929 Act, once publications were referred to the Board via government Ministers, they would be considered, the Board members could contact authors, editors, or publishers to discuss

²⁵ *Irish Independent*, ‘Censorship Act Flaws Stressed: Retail Newsagents Hold Annual Meeting’ (15 February 1939), p.11.

²⁶ *Ibid*; Censorship of Publications Act 1929, Part II, Section 9.

²⁷ NAI JUS 90/102/138, letter from AJM to the Department of Justice (29 May 1941).

²⁸ NAI JUS 90/102/138, letter from the Department of Justice to AJM (7 June 1941).

the complaint, and a decision would be agreed on by at least three of the five Board members.²⁹ Christopher J. O'Reilly—who worked for the Board at the height of its operation in the early-1950s and examined almost thirteen-hundred books himself in a four-year period—recorded in detail the time-consuming and laborious nature of the work members like him were required to undertake in his notebooks.³⁰ Even as an extremely enthusiastic and proactive censor, O'Reilly's accounts highlight a substantial workload that covered only a fraction of the publications being imported and referred to the Censor across the decades of the Board's operation.³¹

Practical considerations were coupled with legal technicalities that tangibly limited the scope of what the Censors could act on, especially in relation to advertising, newspapers, and periodicals imported from Britain, illustrated by correspondence in the archive. Frank O'Reilly was Secretary of the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI)—an organisation convened in 1899 to produce educational religious pamphlets—and wrote to various offices of government repeatedly reporting offensive material.³² For instance, in 1936, he reported a photograph of a nudist wedding in the British newspaper *Sunday Referee*, in 1934 he reported an article on abortion in the British *News Chronicle*, and in 1940 he reported advertisements for Tampax menstrual products in the British periodical *Modern Woman*.³³ Reporting different types of

²⁹ Censorship of Publications Act 1929, Part II, Section 6.

³⁰ James Kelly, 'The Operation of the Censorship of Publications Board: The Notebooks of C.J. O'Reilly, 1951-1955', *Analecta Hibernica*, 38 (2004), pp.225-226.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.227.

³² Keating, 'The Uses and Abuses of Censorship', pp.70-74; Matthew Russell, 'The Catholic Truth Society of Ireland', *The Irish Monthly*, 28:325 (1900), pp.443-445.

³³ NAI JUS 90/102/28, cutting from *Sunday Referee* (22 March 1936), p.13; letter from Frank O'Reilly to Sean Moynihan (25 March 1936); letter from Frank O'Reilly to The Commissioner, *Garda Síochána*, Kilmainham (9 August 1934); cutting from *News Chronicle* (26 July 1934), p.8; JUS/90/102/29, letter from Frank O'Reilly (19 June 1940).

content—photographs, advertisements, and articles—O'Reilly frequently communicated how and where censorship was ineffective, expressing his discontent. For instance, he noted that newspapers kept 'outside the regulations' which stipulated multiple offences in successive issues through staggering articles: 'They can offend on every fifteenth day!'³⁴ O'Reilly believed it was obvious that much of the material that was circulating should not have been, but the Censorship Act contained 'no machinery to stop it': 'I think some effort should be made to provide machinery to deal with issues of this kind. It is quite unlikely that we could get three successive issues to have it banned.'³⁵ Exclaiming that 'Practically all imported periodicals' contained offensive advertisements, he lamented the lack of ability to take action against them using anything other than the police, which was often 'not taken'.³⁶

In these selected letters, O'Reilly highlighted the legal basis for censorship that meant offensive material was able to slip through the net and into circulation. Catching three successive issues of a newspaper with indecent material was difficult especially when the British publishers were cognisant of these conditions. Mark O'Brien has remarked that advertisements might not have appeared frequently, or if they did, newspaper distributors would sometimes cut them out of copies when received.³⁷ Thus, even if a paper regularly printed advertisements, it could take a long time to build the required evidence for prohibition.

Furthermore, disconnect between the State, the Board, organisations pushing for censorship, and the public made the apparatus logistically challenging and incoherent. Although the Board

³⁴ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from Frank O'Reilly to The Commissioner, *Garda Síochána*, Kilmainham (9 August 1934).

³⁵ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from Frank O'Reilly to Sean Moynihan (25 March 1936).

³⁶ NAI JUS 90/102/29, Frank O'Reilly (19 June 1940).

³⁷ O'Brien, 'Policing the press', pp.15, 20-22.

has been described as ‘assertively conservative’ with the majority of members drawn from Catholic orders and backgrounds, the state itself was not always as enthusiastic about censorship as is sometimes portrayed.³⁸ Moreover, according to Keating, ‘Catholic moral entrepreneurs’ like O’Reilly and the CTSI had an ‘acute sensitivity’ to offensive content such as birth control information, and constantly pushed for the tightening of restrictions that the state was less enthusiastic for.³⁹ ‘Fundamentalist’ Irish Catholics like the CTSI were the key proponents and architects of the programme, often dissatisfied with its scope and effectiveness. They pushed for increased legislation and control—as evidenced in O’Reilly’s letters—whilst, as Keating has argued, the Irish public were often ‘passive recipients, rather than active supporters’ of these organisations and the pronouncements of the Board.⁴⁰

Correspondence in the archive again highlights where the State was less proactive, illustrating where and why the applications of censorship were inconsistent. Sometimes, letters to different State departments that flagged indecent material were met with simple directions to the letter-writer to report the content to the Board themselves. For example, AJM was told they could report the five unbanned books from the list of six enquired about should they wish to.⁴¹ Although AJM had provided book titles clearly indicating works about sex and related topics, the State official who replied was not proactive in bringing these to the attention of the Board, illustrating a dissonance between the wider government and the Board’s attitudes.

³⁸ Kelly, ‘The Operation of the Censorship of Publications Board’, p.225; Keating, ‘Censorship, The Cornerstone of Catholic Ireland’, pp.295-296; Ó Drisceoil, “The best banned in the land”, p.147.

³⁹ Keating, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Censorship’, p.67.

⁴⁰ Keating, ‘Censorship, The Cornerstone of Catholic Ireland’, p.73.

⁴¹ NAI JUS 90/102/138, letter from AJM to the Department of Justice (29 May 1941); letter from the Department of Justice to AJM (7 June 1941).

Disagreement between different government departments also exposed varying perceptions of the scope and effectiveness of censorship. J.P. Moynihan in the Department of the President wrote to the Department of Justice in 1935 about an article in a British newspaper. Moynihan was told that the 1929 Act was ‘working satisfactorily’, and any amendments to prohibit papers after single offences would have burdened the Censorship Board too much as well as provoking a ‘very considerable storm’ amongst the English press, something ultimately harmful to Irish newspaper distributors.⁴² Considerations other than the offensive nature of the material came into play for some government officials when responding to censorship requests, and individual mismatched opinions frequently placed restrictions on the scope of the Board’s efforts. This is unsurprising in light of Keating’s work on censorship as the ‘cornerstone of Catholic Ireland’; whilst the state was always sympathetic to the policy, movements pressuring the government to tighten restrictions were often outside of it, unignorable because of the deep connections between the state and the Catholic Church.⁴³ Thus the mechanisms of censorship were demonstrably complex and inconsistently effective, illustrating the limitations of the State’s ability to prevent the circulation of material discussing sex.

‘Innocent agents selling to the public’: Accessing Banned Publications

With the operational structure, legal requirements of the Board, the sheer volume of material to review, and the disconnect between different components of the censorship apparatus, there were multiple ways to access banned publications. In 1939, J.F. McEnerney, President of the Irish Retail Newsagents Booksellers and Stationers’ Association, speculated that as a result of

⁴² NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from Department of Justice to J.P. Moynihan, Department of the President (28 March 1935).

⁴³ Keating, ‘Censorship, The Cornerstone of Catholic Ireland’, pp.295-296.

the Board's shortcomings, there 'must, therefore, in many instances have been innocent agents selling to the public banned literature'.⁴⁴ Once literature was published, imported, and brought to the attention of the authorities, the wheels of prohibition were slow-moving, meaning there was time for literature to be circulated before distributors and consumers even knew it was banned.

Newspaper reports frequently stressed the distribution of obscene literature by unwitting librarians and booksellers as a problem. In 1937, a librarian in Templemore was taken to court for distributing three banned books imported from a circulating library in Liverpool: 'She did not know what books were banned but thought they were all right [sic] when they were allowed in through the customs. Mr. Flood [District Justice] agreed that it was very difficult for ordinary people to know what books are banned.'⁴⁵ In another incident in 1932, a Reverend reported the selling of banned material in Woolworth's, Waterford. He 'found the book (produced) exposed for sale. He purchased a copy and immediately brought it to the Civic Guards. He did not know at the time that the book was prohibited. There was a good deal of objectionable literature in the shop.'⁴⁶ Highlighting the unevenness of the spread of information about banned literature, these cases identify libraries and shops as locations where people could encounter prohibited publications unknowingly, emphasising the incomplete nature of censorship legislation and mechanisms.

⁴⁴ *Irish Independent*, 'Censorship Act Flaws Stressed: Retail Newsagents Hold Annual Meeting' (15 February 1939), p.11.

⁴⁵ *Irish Independent*, 'Banned Books To Be Forfeited: Justice's Comment' (8 March 1937), p.2.

⁴⁶ *Evening Herald*, 'Banned Book. Woolworths Fined £25 For Sale in Waterford' (5 March 1932), p.4.

Even where retailers and citizens were aware of prohibition orders, accessing banned literature was under some circumstances possible where the public could afford import prices and knew where or whom to ask.⁴⁷ By the 1940s, with the growing popularity of cheap American titles, even the banned publications were sold from ‘behind counters, and therefore increasingly available to urban and rural borrowers and buyers’, according to Gerardine Meany, Mary O’Dowd, and Bernadette Whelan.⁴⁸ This demand for and access to banned literature was in fact facilitated by both the Board and Irish newspapers. Lists of banned books published in the *Irish Times* were available to a wide range of the population, meaning titles Irish people would not have known of previously then became ‘tea-table talk’, O’Brien has argued.⁴⁹ This unintended outcome of censorship was flagged in 1932 by a letter to the *Evening Herald*’s ‘Other People’s Views’ column. The author wrote that when a book was banned and reported on:

[...] circulation jumps to an extraordinary degree and there is an immediate demand for such a book[...]. It is well known to travellers that these banned books are in a category of their own, and the greatest recommendation that can be given to them by the people who are responsible for their sale is they are “banned in the I.F.S.”⁵⁰

Demand for literature was increased when it was banned, with prohibition orders even being used to draw in potential readers. Despite this, a Dublin police report from 1936 highlighted

⁴⁷ Keating, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Censorship’, p.73.

⁴⁸ Gerardine Meany, Mary O’Dowd, and Bernadette Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman: Studies in Cultural Encounters and Exchange, 1714-1960* (Liverpool, 2017), p.139.

⁴⁹ O’Brien, ‘Policing the press’, pp.19-20.

⁵⁰ *Evening Herald*, ‘Other People’s Views: Banned Books’ (21 March 1932), p.8.

how even where books (specifically on birth control) were advertised in newspapers and elsewhere, efforts to purchase them were futile.⁵¹

However, with my positioning of advertising as a key mode of access, I argue that the knowledge of a book gained from an advertisement or prohibition order in itself is significant. The tactic of using advertising to convey an amount of limited information to a reader is evident in newspapers. For instance, in 1956, the *Cork Examiner* printed a note from British newspaper *The Observer* criticising the Irish government for a prohibition order:

[...] owing to the inclusion of an article on “FAMILY PLANNING” by Dr. Joan Malleison, a well-known authority on this subject, copies [...] were impounded by the Customs [...]. We consider, and still consider, that this is an important subject which should be discussed.⁵²

This note purposefully flagged the banned content to Irish readers, making a statement about the perceived injustices of censorship whilst implicitly advertising Malleison’s name and the importance of her work on family planning. Thus access to banned material was possible, and even where it was not, Irish people gained some form of limited access through the censorship process itself.

Into the 1940s and 1950s—the most active period for the Board—there is evidence of more information about sex, marriage, and birth control circulating in Ireland.⁵³ Titles and

⁵¹ O'Brien, ‘Policing the press’, p.21.

⁵² *Cork Examiner* (7 April 1956), p.7. Emphasis original.

⁵³ Kelly, ‘The Operation of the Censorship of Publications Board’, pp.225-226.

descriptions of advice literature and related self-help style books appear in several Irish newspapers where books were received from publishers and authors for review or lists of the latest releases. Taking Scottish psychiatrist Dr Eustace Chesser's work as an example, the increase in accessibility of advice literature in Ireland past the 1930s can be extrapolated. Chesser's *Marriage and Freedom* was listed under 'Books Received' by the *Irish Independent* in July 1946, *Unwanted Child* was described in the same paper in 1947, and *How to Make a Success of Your Marriage* in November 1952, followed by *An Outline of Human Relationships* in 1959. Chesser and Olive Hawks' book *Life Lies Ahead* is listed in 1951, Chesser's *Women* is advertised in the *Irish Examiner* in 1958.⁵⁴ This does not say much about how easy it was to access the actual literature, but it does suggest that the advertising of some advice books was not prevented, especially beyond the Free State period. O'Brien's characterisation of Irish censorship as 'a sustained game of cat and mouse' between publishers, distributors, and the State thus summarises the practical and legal complexities of the process that enabled some sexual knowledge to be distributed in Ireland through several different types of publications.⁵⁵

To assume Irish people could not or did not access information about sex, bodies, and desire lacks nuance and attention to the complexity of censorship and its impacts. Arguments around sex education in Ireland have often oversimplified what it meant to access sexual knowledge. For example, Irish doctor Michael Solomons said to the *Irish Independent* in 2015: 'There was no sex education unless books were smuggled in from England. Anything to do with

⁵⁴ *Irish Independent* (22 July 1946), p. 6; *Irish Independent* (8 December 1947), p.3; *Irish Independent* (22 November 1952), p.4; *Irish Independent* (28 February 1959), p.8; *Irish Examiner* (6 September 1958), p.6.

⁵⁵ O'Brien, 'Policing the press', p.21.

contraception, which all sex manuals included, would never be allowed in.’⁵⁶ Whilst books explicitly about sex, bodies, and desire were often prohibited, they were not always impossible to access. Even where access was denied completely, prohibition itself spread knowledge about publications through lists of banned books in newspapers and generated a demand for banned literature sought out from travellers and behind counters. The Board’s operational structure and the sometimes-inconsistent attitudes of Board members, Catholic authorities, and state officials meant censorship did not always operate smoothly and without contest. The purposeful advertising of banned material—such as *The Observer*’s reactive statement—and the loopholes created by the requirement of repeated, successive offences for prohibition provided avenues for advertising of information about sex to be distributed. My analysis here therefore positions limited references to sexual and marital advice books and thus advertising as an important mode of access to sexual knowledge that was available in Ireland from the 1930s onwards, even where the full texts themselves were inaccessible. But what are the meanings of the specific material contexts and cultural forms in which these advertisements were encountered?

‘Do they not make terrible reading?’: Pulp, ‘Americanisation’, and Access

When reporting the issue of *Gang World* advertising an advice book to the Censorship Board in 1939, TP displayed his prejudices towards pulp magazines when he asked the rhetorical question: ‘Do they not make terrible reading?’⁵⁷ The focus of his contempt was the offensive book being advertised in the magazine, yet his question simultaneously nodded towards a wider set of judgements about pulp magazines within which, as David M. Earle has noted, pulp has

⁵⁶ *Irish Independent*, ‘Sex ed? People were ignorant...and the Church was to blame’ (28 September 2015), p.19.

⁵⁷ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from TP to Seán Lemass (11 August 1934).

been configured as a derogatory term for ‘the lowest forms of fiction’.⁵⁸ Judgements about the suitability and status of fiction—and pulp magazines specifically—were rife in cultural commentaries in the decades following the Second World War. Famously, in his discussion of what he termed ‘spicy’ magazines, academic Richard Hoggart argued that the ‘almost entirely unvaried diet of sensation without commitment is surely likely to [...] induce an underlying sense of purposelessness in existence outside the limited range of a few immediate appetites’ amongst consumers.⁵⁹ Locating the cultural problem of pulp as the enabling of a hedonistic, impatient culture of emotional and moral baselessness, Hoggart’s commentary is revealing of the tensions surrounding increasingly accessible forms of literature. There has been some insightful work reflecting on the significance of the pulp genre that goes beyond these criticisms, particularly in relation to the politics of American lesbian pulp magazines and novels in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁰ As some historians have noted, pulp was an especially important part of working-class literary taste in twentieth-century Ireland, although advertising in pulp magazines in this context has been subject to little scrutiny.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Earle, ‘Conrad Under Wraps’, p.41.

⁵⁹ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of working-class life with special reference to publications and entertainments*, first published 1957 (Harmondsworth, 1997), p.246.

⁶⁰ For examples, see Yvonne Keller, “‘Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?’” Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965’, *American Quarterly*, 57:2 (2005), pp.385-410; Martin Meeker, ‘A Queer and Contested Medium: The Emergence of Representational Politics in the “Golden Age” of Lesbian Paperbacks, 1955-1963’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 17:1 (2005), pp.165-188; Christopher S. Nealon, ‘Invert-History: The Ambivalence of Lesbian Pulp Fiction’, *New Literary History*, 31:4 (2000), pp.745-764; Suzanna Sanuta Walters, ‘As Her Hand Crept Slowly Up Her Thigh: Ann Bannon and the Politics of Pulp’, *Social Text*, 23 (1989), pp.83-101.

⁶¹ Meany, O’Dowd and Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman*, pp.130-175.

Prior to the twentieth century, although Irish literacy was increasing, the selection of literature and opportunities to read available to the majority of the population would have been limited.⁶² Easy access to reading material in general was constrained for many into the twentieth century, as illustrated in author Edna O’Brien’s memoir; her rural town boasted twenty-seven pubs and a selection of shops but no library.⁶³ However, as the century drew on, the development of popular culture and affordable publications like pulp magazines would have meant people encountered a significantly larger amount of reading material. Access to reading materials in Ireland increased significantly in the first half of the century through a variety of retailers and library borrowing systems, giving men and women from all class backgrounds more material to engage with.⁶⁴ As Meany, O’Dowd, and Whelan have argued, there was an ‘explosion’ in American publishing during the interwar period that was felt in Ireland, where both new editions and cheaper, out-of-date issues were sold in a range of popular shops.⁶⁵ O’Brien also detailed in her memoir how her access to literature changed, from borrowing books from others to spending time in the bookshops of Dublin, to getting a library subscription.⁶⁶ In this context of expanding access to reading material, who would have been picking up pulp magazines in Woolworth’s—and therefore who would have been encountering advertisements for advice literature—in Ireland is important to consider.

Contemporary anxieties surrounding reading habits are revealing of which sections of the population were drawn to pulp magazines. Andrew Murphy’s work on nationalism and reading

⁶² Rebecca Anne Barr, Sarah-Anne Buckley, and Muireann O’Cinneide, (eds), *Literacy, Language and Reading in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Liverpool, 2019), pp.1-12; O’Faolain, *Chicago May*, p.105.

⁶³ Edna O’Brien, *Country Girl: A Memoir* (London, 2013), p.37.

⁶⁴ Meany, O’Dowd and Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman*, p.132.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, pp.134-135.

⁶⁶ O’Brien, *Country Girl*, pp.49, 56, 95, 117.

has argued that popular publications amongst working-class readers included ‘disposable papers and magazines and sensationalist fiction’ from Britain, in conjunction with American ‘detective or other sensationalist stories’.⁶⁷ Similarly, Hoggart’s commentary in the late-1950s described what he had identified as the typical reader of pulp magazines: working-class people, especially men and adolescents, ‘below the average intelligence’ that were not typical of this class but were nevertheless ‘portent’ of moral and cultural decline.⁶⁸ In the Irish context, propelled by a huge decline in Irish publishing and an increase of imported literature, nationalist commentators had particular concerns around the reading habits of working-class people beyond school age. As early as 1892, nationalist writer Charles Gavan Duffy complained of the effects of this literature on its primary readership, working-class young men.⁶⁹ The wrong types of literature were seen as a threat to the minds of the youth, and implicitly, to the state and nation.

These anxieties are evidenced elsewhere as the century went on. For instance, in the *Irish Independent*, Mr. D O’Flynn, a member of *Comhairle le Leas Óige* (Council for the Welfare of Youth), a youth welfare council formed as part of statutory state intervention on youth unemployment, expressed concern over the mental impact of ‘pernicious literature’. He said that youth club leaders ‘realise[ed] in a very real way the great danger involved for the adolescent mind.’⁷⁰ Furthermore, writing to the Censorship Board in 1951, FPO drew out this

⁶⁷ Andrew Murphy, *Ireland, Reading and Cultural Nationalism, 1790-1930: Bringing the Nation to Book* (Cambridge, 2018), p.75.

⁶⁸ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, pp.248-250.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pp.73-78, 85.

⁷⁰ *Irish Independent*, ‘Flood Of Indecent Books: Leaders Of Youth Clubs Worried’ (6 December 1957), p.12. On *Comhairle le Leas Óige*, see Maurice Devlin, ‘Youth Work in Ireland—Some Historical Reflections’ in Griet Verschelden, (ed), *The History of Youth Work in Europe: Relevance for Youth Policy Today* (Strasbourg, 2012), p.98.

connection very explicitly. He stated that ‘Old I.R.A. [Irish Republican Army] men’ he had consulted agreed that something should be done about ‘the tons of filthy papers, books, magazines, postcards etc., which adorn[ed] the paper shops and spread poison throughout the country.’ To FPO, this was of ‘utmost importance, as it is to fight an enemy more dangerous than an invading army.’⁷¹

The notion that the nation’s moral and religious character was being degraded specifically by imported ‘filthy literature’ and other forms of popular culture (dance halls, ‘bad pictures’, circulating libraries, theatres, and picture houses) was prevalent in the 1930s. Narratives of decline and degradation of Irish society were not limited to individual expressions of frustration and anger. For example, the 1935 Criminal Law Amendment Act—seen as a defining statute of the IFS—was based on a committee whose findings characterised Ireland’s moral state as ‘so shocking that they could not be published’.⁷² Moreover, FPO’s nostalgic reflection on the 1916 Easter Rising and Irish War of Independence between 1919 and 1921 and the reference to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) invokes a correlation between the increased availability of popular culture that referenced the sexual and the gradual loss of Catholic morality which was the basis of the founding of the Free State.⁷³ Anxieties surrounding imported decadence in Ireland pre-dated the 1930s. For example, Joep Leerssen has argued that as early as the 1880s, Irish commentators such as Douglas Hyde were proposing a resistance of the ‘general cultural modernisation process, experienced as a vulgarising decadence’ identified with cultural imports

⁷¹ NAI JUS 90/102/138, letter from FPO to the Minister for Justice, (4 September 1951).

⁷² Thomas O’Malley, *Sexual Offences: Law, Policy and Punishment* (Dublin, 1996), p.6; Mark Finnane, ‘The Carrigan Committee of 1930-31 and the ‘Moral Condition of the Saorstát’’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 32:128 (2001), pp.522-523.

⁷³ NAI JUS 90/102/138, letter from FPO to the Minister for Justice (4 September 1951).

from the English-speaking world.⁷⁴ Thus the perceived degradation of Irish minds and the nation state was culturally bound to the expansion of access to popular culture, an evolution of longer-term anxieties surrounding the modernisation of Ireland, of which publications from America were part.

Those writing to the Censorship Board may have overemphasised the availability of American pulp in Ireland in light of these anxieties. For instance, PK seeking out ‘immoral’ content over multiple years—reporting an advertisement first in 1934, and again in 1939—is suggestive of an obsession with finding and reporting literature perceived as damaging to the national character. In the 1939 letter, he described a confrontation with the store manager who told him to leave as he stood there ‘examining’ publications for obscene advertisements.⁷⁵ Certainly, American magazines were available in smaller quantities than British publications.⁷⁶ Despite this, if we view those reporting to the Board as overzealous, we fail to take seriously their feelings and motivations for writing. In an environment where internal and external lives were shaped by conservative religious views of sex and bodies, these letters from lay people encapsulate the genuine fears of immorality and sin that we know to have guided many Irish people’s experiences of the sexual. As Chelsea-Anne Saxby has written of complaints about sex on television in 1970s Britain, these letters represent some individual attempts to navigate and

⁷⁴ Joep Leerssen, ‘Cúchulain in the General Post Office: Gaelic revival, Irish rising’, *Journal of the British Academy*, 4 (2016), p.153.

⁷⁵ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from PK to Mr Derrig (18 December 1934); letter from Mr Derrig to PK (31 December 1934); NAI JUS 90/102/138, letter from PK to Minister of Justice (6 June 1939).

⁷⁶ Meany, O’Dowd and Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman*, pp.132-135.

have control over the content they saw as harmful to their morality and that of Irish people more generally.⁷⁷

By the 1950s, there is evidence that American pulp was considerably widespread in Ireland, and the growth of the market for these publications since the complaints to the Censorship Board in the interwar years cements their importance as a mode through which readers encountered advice literature. The Galway County Libraries Committee were faced with a ‘problem’ in 1957 following a report from the County Librarian that ‘many readers [were] looking only for light love stories.’ These readers were of all ages, and with the increase of literacy, a ‘ready market’ for ‘pulp fiction’ emerged in Ireland. Readers who ‘yearn[ed]’ for it were compared condescendingly to ‘serious readers’; they were frivolous, unappreciative of real literature and the library service, and influenced by the mass-production of cheap books which ‘degenerated’ popular literary taste.⁷⁸ A report in the *Irish Independent* the same year claimed concerns amongst youth club leaders were growing over ‘a flood of indecent books and periodicals’, including American ‘pulp’, on Dublin shop shelves and street stands.⁷⁹ The *Sunday Independent* also complained that these magazines, available in a ‘Dublin bookshop’ should ‘never have been admitted to Ireland’ where they risked falling into the hands of children or adolescents.⁸⁰ Despite the contempt the press and other cultural authorities held towards

⁷⁷ Chelsea-Anne Saxby, ‘Making love on British Telly: Watching Sex, Bodies and Intimate Lives in the Long 1970s’, PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2020, p.cxvi.

⁷⁸ *Tuam Herald*, ‘Editorial: Love On The Shelf’ (3 August 1957), p.5.

⁷⁹ *Irish Independent*, ‘Flood Of Indecent Books: Leaders Of Youth Clubs Worried’ (6 December 1957), p.12.

⁸⁰ *Sunday Independent*, ‘Don’t allow these books to be sold by T.P. Kilfeather’ (29 December 1957), p.10.

cheap fiction and magazines, a newsboy used to sell ‘five dozen pulp magazines a day—when he [could] get them’, reported the *Irish Press* in 1951.⁸¹

The young, working-class man as the primary demographic reading pulp magazines in Ireland mirrors reading patterns discernible in other national contexts. Reconstructing the audience for detective pulp magazines in America and Britain, Erin Smith has argued that the genre was popular with working-class men in the interwar period. The fiction and advertisements within these magazines articulated a specific ‘working-class variant of consumer culture that has been mostly overlooked in studies of American magazines and advertising.’⁸² Whilst information about working-class reading practices is difficult to rely on alone, published letters in pulp magazines, surveys of reading habits in the United States and oral histories of British labourers after the Second World War help to build the picture of who pulp readers were.⁸³

However, the popularity of American popular culture amongst Irish women and the cultural appeal of ‘Americanisation’, combined with the press reports from later decades, suggests that the readership of pulp in this period was much broader, and thus it is reasonable to assume many women would have also been encountering the advertisements through this mode. The draw of America was part of a long-established trend of cultural exchange, preceded by the majority of post-Famine emigrants setting sail for the United States from Ireland.⁸⁴ A majority of emigrants from Ireland by the end of the nineteenth century were women.⁸⁵ In particular, the cultural

⁸¹ *Irish Press*, ‘Day to Day: Want A Telephone? Bill Will Say No’ (2 February 1951), p.6.

⁸² Erin Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia, 2000), pp.10, 44.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p.9.

⁸⁴ David Fitzpatrick, *The Americanisation of Ireland Migration and Settlement, 1841-1925* (Cambridge, 2019), p.x.

⁸⁵ Nuala O’Faolain, *The Story of Chicago May* (London, 2005), pp.17-18.

appeal of America to Irish women has been an important subject in historic interventions and popular culture. Nuala O’Faolain memorably wrote of the cultural connections between Irish women in particular and America in her biography of ‘Chicago May’, who left behind rural Irish life for the opportunities of the ‘New World’ in the 1890s. May—and the author herself—had ‘looked to America as a place of transformation’.⁸⁶

This transformative appeal has frequently been combined with a sense of American life as a distant ‘Other’ in Irish culture. In Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls*—a novel depicting the experiences of rural Irish women, controversial for its frank handling of female sexuality—protagonist Caithleen’s mother had been to America as a young girl, where her beauty had been admired and she was gifted jewellery; this jewellery became representative for Caithleen of a distant life outside of rural Ireland, as well as her sorrow for the death of her mother. Baba, the subject of Caithleen’s fraught childhood friendship, read American film magazines in bed as an escape from the drudgery of convent life, and ‘adventure books’ in a local paper shop in the village, suggesting to Caithleen that becoming film stars would be their way out of the convent and more broadly, Ireland.⁸⁷ O’Faolain posits that in a society where the leisurely reading of ‘serious’ fiction was not widely available, ‘the many’ still had ‘imaginative needs’ for which they looked elsewhere to fill.⁸⁸ She explicitly detailed the transformative and escapist properties of reading on her subject, Chicago May, showing how access to literature was ‘salvation’ during a stint in prison, and relating this to her own experience of reading ‘to blot out’ her surroundings during tumultuous times in her childhood.⁸⁹ The United States has therefore been framed as a

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.8

⁸⁷ Edna O’Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy*, first published 1960-1964 (London, 2017), pp.33, 130.

⁸⁸ O’Faolain, *Chicago May*, p. 105.

⁸⁹ Ibid, pp.199, 201.

location for transformation and escape, especially for young women characterised as trapped and lacking prospects in rural, religious Ireland.

In this context, it makes sense that the transformative cultural appeal not only spoke to women and drew them away to unfamiliar shores but fuelled a consumption of American cultural products in everyday life at home too. As noted by Meany, O'Dowd, and Whelan, by the 1930s, 'American ideas, practices and products slowly permeated Irish society', with women as primary consumers of American products, 'avidly' reading imported popular fiction, placing them at the centre of the process of cultural exchange and 'Americanisation'.⁹⁰ Despite this, women's engagement with cheap genre fiction and pulp specifically in the Irish context has lacked historiographical engagement. Historians like Murphy have focused specifically on imported literature from England, only nodding to the spread of American literature, and almost completely excluding women's reading habits and gendered experiences of reading more generally beyond select mentions of the contributions of women to nationalist writing.⁹¹ This is part of a wider theme whereby women are substantively overlooked in understandings of Irish literary culture, although recent work has gone some way to remedy this, including efforts by John Connolly to recognise the contributions of women to cheap genre fiction similar to pulp.⁹² Whilst pulp magazines and novels would not have comprised the entirety of this material Irish women were consuming, they were no doubt part of it. The cheap fiction advice literature

⁹⁰ Meany, O'Dowd and Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman*, pp.174, 179-195.

⁹¹ Murphy, *Ireland, Reading and Cultural Nationalism*, pp.84, 87.

⁹² John Connolly, *Shadow Voices: 300 Years of Irish Genre Fiction* (London, 2021). See also Heather Ingman and Cliona Ó Gallchoir, (eds), *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature* (Cambridge, 2018); Emer Nolan, *Five Irish Women: The Second Republic, 1960-2016* (Manchester, 2019), pp.13-48, 119-162.

adverts were found in was certainly picked up by men, but very likely by working-class women too.

Woolworth's and Encounters with American Literature

PK had told the Board that the offending advertisements for Rubin's books were in 'nearly all American novels' in Woolworth's, positioning literature imported from the United States found in cheap chain stores across Ireland between the 1930s and 1950s as spaces of 'cultural encounter', to borrow Meany, O'Dowd and Whelan's phrasing.⁹³ A number of shopping locations stocked American publications, from bookshops, newsagents, and stationers, to post offices and circulating libraries, meaning Woolworth's was not an isolated space in which these encounters could happen.⁹⁴ However, amongst these locations, Woolworth's is particularly revealing of the cultural meanings of imported literature that contained advertisements for sex advice books. Its 'scattered presence across the Free State', with forty-one branches by the 1960s that serviced a wide range of communities in urban centres and smaller, more rural locations, attested to its popularity and ability to reach a range of Irish consumers.⁹⁵

Letters to the Board reported publications from Cork, Kilkenny, and Dublin, highlighting just three of the six stores the company ran across the island at that time.⁹⁶ The *Freeman's Journal* reported that 'large crowds' visited the new store in Dublin in 1918, despite customers being

⁹³ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from PK to Mr. Derrig (18 December 1934); Meany, O'Dowd and Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman*, pp.130-175.

⁹⁴ Meany, O'Dowd and Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman*, p.132.

⁹⁵ Walsh, 'Chain store retailing in Ireland', p.100.

⁹⁶ Jean Maddern Pitrone, *F.W. Woolworth and the American Five and Dime: A Social History* (North Carolina, 2007), p.86.

unable to make purchases until the formal opening the following day.⁹⁷ Through its popularity, Woolworth's held cultural significance, not only within Irish consumer life but in popular culture produced in the twentieth century. For instance, in O'Brien's *The Country Girls*, the fourteen-year-old protagonist Caitheleen Brady shops in the Limerick branch of Woolworth's.⁹⁸ The popularity and cultural cachet of the chain—driven by affordable pricing, the appeal of American modernity, and a welcoming, inclusive space—contextualises its importance as a location where sexual knowledge could be encountered.

Woolworth's origins as an American chain intended to be accessible to a wide spectrum of shoppers with different class, gender, and age profiles is indicative of the social and cultural significance of who encountered American publications there. The 'Americanisation' of Irish culture previously discussed highlights which consumers were drawn to Woolworth's and why. Fond accounts of the shopping environment that explicitly indicate its appeal to the excitement and luxury of modern America are common. In Tipperary's *The Nationalist*, when Woolworth's began to close all stores in the ROI in 1984, Christopher Roche remembered the stores with a sense of excitement and familiarity as a feature of his childhood. 'So much of my life seemed to pass within its bounds', he wrote, emphasising the impact the retailer had on both him and the wider Irish population:

[...] the name was magic in those early years when the spell of big cities suddenly burst upon small towns. [...] Woolworth's represented all that was glamorous and exciting in cosmopolitan trade. To enter the fabulous store was to illude yourself that you were

⁹⁷ *Freeman's Journal*, 'Woolworth's New Branch' (17 August 1918), p.7.

⁹⁸ O'Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy*, p.70.

elsewhere, in more stirring climes. And yet, conversely, it could also remind you of home.⁹⁹

As a space of cultural encounter, in Woolworth's, Irish shoppers came into contact with the glamour of global big cities, where they were able to escape into an exciting world of consumerism yet feel part of something distinctly familiar and comforting. Woolworth's approach to retailing was grounded in providing shoppers with 'every kind of affordable exotic and desirable indulgence that hinted of modern America.'¹⁰⁰ Woolworth's, then, capitalised on an existing phenomenon of 'Americanisation' and the deep cultural connections already developed between the United States and Irish people—especially women. It simultaneously placed itself at the forefront of driving and being receptive to demand for American shopping environments, products, and the ideas of a transformative American modernity that came with them.

Woolworth's attempted to appeal to both women and men across generational boundaries, playing up to notions of gendered roles within domestic life and marketing itself as a space where masculine and feminine pleasures coexisted. Advertisements depicted a gendered environment that had something for everyone. The Cork store opened in 1931, advertising a whole floor labelled the 'Housewives' Paradise' displaying a plethora of household items, paired with a men's 'Hardware' department with every tool a customer could want.¹⁰¹ Staff memories recall the 'good old days' of Woolworth's where a predominantly young, female

⁹⁹ *The Nationalist (Tipperary)*, 'The Christopher Roche Column: Two Beginnings' (1 September 1984), p.24.

¹⁰⁰ Walsh, 'Chain store retailing in Ireland', p.103.

¹⁰¹ *Evening Echo*, 'Woolworth's Super Store' (22 September 1931), p.4.

workforce fostered a ‘family’ environment.¹⁰² ‘Shop girls’ were a common feature of the stores across Ireland and beyond, making up approximately a fifth of the female workforce in Britain alone by the 1960s.¹⁰³ Thomas Richards has argued that at the turn of the twentieth century, advertising had succeeded in establishing ‘a female model for consumption without ceding the activity entirely to women.’¹⁰⁴ A feminised model signposted explicitly gendered roles based on the sexual division of labour through the products sold, but no longer confined the feminine psychological and physical process of shopping to one gender; men and women both participated.¹⁰⁵ The shopping experience, as illustrated by how Woolworth’s positioned its goods and the intended family environment, was thus curated for and available to all, whilst upholding gendered notions of consumption and work.

Being attractive to people with varying incomes gave Woolworth’s a wide customer base, but specifically drew in the working classes. The chain became a demotic space that broke down boundaries between classes, genders, and generations, opening up an array of possibilities and dangers for consumers. Dublin’s Henry Street branch opened a new ‘progressive’ cafeteria in 1930, and the *Evening Herald* commented: ‘The average person knows how interesting and beneficial it is to walk through the sales floors [...]. It is the freedom of handling and the enormous assortment of goods, coupled with the big values, that has built up this gigantic

¹⁰² *The Kerryman*, ‘Woolworth’s staff remember life in Tralee’s great department store’ (22 September 2000), p.7.

¹⁰³ *Evening Herald*, ‘Lightning Strike in Belfast: Woolworth’s Store Girls, Manager Booed’ (6 April 1937), p.1; *Irish Examiner*, ‘Woolworth Girls Go Back’ (30 November 1961), p.5; Pamela Cox and Annabel Hobley, *Shopgirls: The True Story Behind the Counter* (London, 2014), p.xi.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford, 1990), p.206.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.207.

business.’¹⁰⁶ Accessibility and affordability was at the forefront of the chain store’s brand. A wide array of goods coupled with open displays brought ‘freedom’ to customers, constructing a space that was not only for buying, but for browsing and *experiencing* the exciting possibilities of modern mass consumerism across class boundaries. As Richards has identified, shops like this were part of the ‘spectacle’ of consumption, a culmination of efforts to represent and reposition the mass-produced commodity in cultural life.¹⁰⁷

The ‘average person’ that Woolworth’s intended to reach was increasingly associated with the archetypal working-class man or woman into the century, as Claire Langhamer has illustrated through her historicising of the category of ‘ordinary’.¹⁰⁸ Hoggart, in his many writings on the experience of shopping, identified piles of unintimidating cheap goods in open displays in Woolworth’s as creating a sense of class belonging.¹⁰⁹ Further illustrating this, Marie Farrell reminisced in a 1962 article: ‘The world and his wife and family go in and out of Woolworth’s within an hour or two and furs of distinguished lineage rub shoulders with the humblest of plain cloth coats.’¹¹⁰ The physical closeness of shoppers from noticeably different class backgrounds stands out. Farrell paints a picture of a space where consumers were not only made to *feel* like they belonged, but where the physical separation of the lives of the rich and poor was eroded within the spectacle that was the chain store. The category of ‘average’ is therefore harnessed

¹⁰⁶ *Evening Herald*, ‘Progressive Idea. Success of Cafeteria Installed in Messrs. Woolworth’s.’ (25 June 1930), p.9.

¹⁰⁷ Richards, *Commodity Culture*, pp.2-3.

¹⁰⁸ Claire Langhamer, ‘Who the hell are ordinary people?’ Ordinarieness as a category of historical analysis’, *Transactions of the RHS*, 28 (2018), pp.175-195.

¹⁰⁹ Rachel Bowlby, ‘The uses of shopping: Richard Hoggart goes to Woolworth’s’, *Textual Practice*, 35:7 (2021), pp.6, 8; Richard Hoggart, *A Story of Clowning: Life and Times, Volume II: 1940-59* (Oxford, 1999), pp.189; Richard Hoggart, *Townscape with Figures: Farnham: Portrait of an English Town* (London, 1994), pp.24, 111.

¹¹⁰ *Evening Herald*, ‘Let’s buy it at ‘Woollers’: The Whole World is Woolworth’s Customer by Marie Farrell’ (7 March 1962), p.9.

in these depictions to portray an environment that had a specific class-based appeal yet also transcended class boundaries.

This representation of shopping as an accessible experience is familiar and connects with wider understandings of Woolworth's marketing strategies. Since launching in Britain in 1909, Woolworth's purposefully appealed to working-class consumers.¹¹¹ It was moulded as a primary location for consumers to access a huge range of everyday and more luxurious items at low prices under the slogan 'Nothing in these stores over 6d'. The store led the low-cost retail market by the start of the First World War and became established as a brand that provided value for money in Britain and far beyond.¹¹² Furthermore, the curated displays of cheap goods were a purposeful marketing choice: they made possible a convenient browsing experience free from pressure to purchase. According to Barbara Walsh, faced with practical goods and more frivolous luxuries, Irish consumers were led into a world of 'pleasure and leisure [...] an enjoyable, modestly self-indulgent and affordable element of a day's outing for consumers.'¹¹³

The association between mass consumption and pleasure was developing by the turn of the twentieth century, based on more thoroughly established ideas about shopping in modern cities like London.¹¹⁴ In Irish culture in particular, representations of shopping have been paired with allusions to women's sexual transgression, embedding the setting of Woolworth's as a pleasurable space that flexed class and gender boundaries with additional meaning in the

¹¹¹ Kathryn A. Morrison, *Woolworth's: 100 Years on the High Street* (Liverpool, 2015), pp.5-28; Tom Buckley, 'Review: Kathryn A. Morrison, *Woolworth's: 100 years on the High Street*', *Economic History Review*, 69:4 (2016), p.1379.

¹¹² Walsh, 'Chain store retailing in Ireland', pp.98, 103.

¹¹³ Ibid, p.103.

¹¹⁴ Erika D. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, 2001), pp.4, 142-144.

context of advertising advice literature. In the aforementioned anecdote in O'Brien's *The Country Girls*, Caithleen purchases a pink lipstick in Woolworth's after shopping for convent uniform, prior to meeting with Mr. Gentleman—the man who grooms her into a sexual relationship—in Limerick. The lipstick, in a disturbing contrast to her childish youth and convent uniform, is a sign of maturity and womanhood to Caithleen, and a representation of her transgression.¹¹⁵ This can be positioned as part of a wider conversation in twentieth-century Ireland around the perceived detrimental effects of mass consumption 'foreign vice' that would develop and encourage transgressive behaviours in Irish people, especially the youth.¹¹⁶ Thus as a space not only where limited sexual knowledge could be accessed, but through which the image of a transgressive, modern, American-influenced lifestyle became available to young working-class Irish women in particular, Woolworth's is significant.

This section has demonstrated that whilst censorship negatively defined access to publications that dealt with sexual knowledges, there were loopholes and inconsistencies in the legal apparatus that made access possible in more subtle, ephemeral ways. The importance of imported American pulp fiction magazines as a location for encounters with advertising for advice literature is one mode of access that has not received much attention, despite multiple reports of such advertisements to the Censorship Board. Taking seriously these reports, the cultural significance of these magazines—as cheap, relatively widely available publications that spoke to an Irish interest in American popular culture, especially amongst working-class men and women—renders them and Woolworth's as a primary location for their sale an important mode of access to emerging ideas about sex, bodies, and desires. In doing so, I have shown how

¹¹⁵ O'Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy*, pp.6970.

¹¹⁶ Keating, 'Censorship: The Cornerstone of Catholic Ireland', pp.289-290.

the movement of publications across national borders, which were porous if often characterised by restrictions, highlights the role of consumer culture in the variable and complicated spread of sexual knowledges in print. But what, exactly, were readers able to discern from the advertisements? And what did this mean to them and on a societal level?

Dangerous Adverts

PK was concerned the advertisements for Rubin's *Eugenics and Sex Harmony* would 'fall into the hands of the youths' and spread immorality, whilst the anonymous letter about advertisements in *Star Detective* similarly asserted that it was obvious 'how dangerous such advts. [sic] are to our young people.'¹¹⁷ The letter-writers positioned advertising as a mode through which young people in particular could be exposed to 'dangerous' or offensive information and ideas. Fears over the impacts of advertising were made clear in complaints about advertising in imported publications from Britain as well. For instance, MSR reported an advertisement for *The Concise Home Doctor* in the *Radio Times*. This was a two-volume guide to 'Anatomy, Beauty Culture, Dietetics, Sex Education, Hygiene, First Aid, Nursing, Mothercraft [...]' framed as appropriate for 'both sexes of all ages' but specifically helpful to teenage girls.¹¹⁸ This advertisement would have reached a wide audience in Britain—and in Ireland when it circumvented censorship—with the *Radio Times* being an extremely popular periodical reaching a circulation of 8,000,000 weekly by the 1930s.¹¹⁹ That people felt

¹¹⁷ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from PK to Mr. Derrig (18 December 1934); NAI JUS 90/102/138, anonymous letter (undated, circa 1939).

¹¹⁸ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from MSR to the Department of Justice (14th November 1935); letter from S.A. Roche, Secretary at the Department of Justice (20th November 1935).

¹¹⁹ Harold Herd, *The March of Journalism: The Story of the British Press from 1622 to the Present Day* (London, 1952), p.290.

compelled to report advertisements to the Censorship Board is suggestive of the encompassing nature of Catholic understandings of sexual knowledge and morality, and perhaps represents an extreme view of the power of advertising sexual knowledge on Irish people. Historiography on censorship in this context illuminates this further, for example, O'Brien positions contraceptive advertisements alongside advice literature and academic research on sexuality as key focal points for the Censorship Board's efforts as well as the concerns of 'Catholic moral entrepreneurs'.¹²⁰

Taking feelings towards the risks of advertisements seriously, it is important to consider what these advertisements might have meant to those who encountered them. Some historians have demonstrated the educational potential of advertising, giving weight to the argument for its importance as a mode of disseminating sexual knowledge. Multiple historians have acknowledged the power of advertisements to transfer information. For instance, Stephanie Rains has written on abortifacient advertisements spreading information in the Free State period, their euphemistic phrasing 'likely understood by women readers', whilst Laura Kelly has noted how advertisements in British newspapers circulated birth control information in 1920s Ireland.¹²¹ In the British context, recent work by Claire L. Jones has explored commodified contraceptive advertising to illustrate how advertising alluded to information about sex at a time when who had access to sexual knowledges was contested, revealing more varied consumption patterns by class, gender, and location than has previously been

¹²⁰ O'Brien, 'Policing the press', pp.15-30.

¹²¹ Stephanie Rains, "'No irregularity or obstruction can resist them": advertising of abortion pills in the Irish press, 1890-1930', *Irish Studies Review*, 29:4 (2021), p.407; Laura Kelly, *Contraception and Modern Ireland: A Social History, c. 1922-92* (Cambridge, 2023), p.31.

recognised.¹²² This has built on earlier, brief comments from Porter and Hall, who wrote that advertisements in magazines ‘might also supply information’.¹²³ Despite broader scholarship on the marketing of sexual knowledges and advice literature, especially in the nineteenth century British and American contexts, less has been written on the advertising of advice books in the IFS and ROI specifically.¹²⁴

‘The Forbidden Secrets of Sex are Daringly Revealed!’: Advertising the American Sexual Ideal

The imagery and written content of the advertisements is telling of the types of sexual knowledge Irish people were presented with by American advertisers; it pushed a vision of sexual relationships with a transformative focus. With the letters about magazines and novels in Woolworth’s, letter-writers sent cuttings, three of which I focus on here. The first was from *George Bruce’s Squadron*:

¹²² Claire L. Jones, *The Business of Birth Control: Contraception and Commerce in Britain Before the Sexual Revolution* (Manchester, 2020); Claire L. Jones, ‘Under the Covers? Commerce, Contraceptives and Consumers in England and Wales, 1880-1960’, *Social History of Medicine*, 29:4 (2015), pp.734-756.

¹²³ Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life*, p.266.

¹²⁴ Sarah Bull, ‘A Purveyor of Garbage? Charles Carrington and the Marketing of Sexual Science in Late-Victorian Britain’, *Victorian Review*, 38:1 (2012), pp.55-76; Sarah Bull, ‘More than a case of mistaken identity: Adult entertainment and the making of early sexology’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 34:1 (2021), pp.10-39; Sarah Bull, ‘Obscenity and the Publication of Sexual Science in Britain, 1810-1914’, Simon Fraser University, PhD thesis, 2014; Alicia Puglionesi, ‘“Your Whole Effort Has Been to Create Desire”: Reproducing Knowledge and Evading Censorship in the Nineteenth-Century Subscription Press’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 89:3 (2015), pp.463-490.

Squadron magazine April 1934.

**Banish Fear
of
Disease
End Self Denial**





**KNOW THE AMAZING TRUTH
ABOUT SEX AND LOVE!**



**Stop Worrying
Conquer Ignorance
Overcome Shame**





The Forbidden Secrets of Sex are Daringly Revealed!

AWAY with false modesty! At last a famous doctor has told all the secrets of sex in frank, daring language. No prudish beating about the bush, no veiled hints, but TRUTH, blazing through 576 pages of straightforward facts.

Love is the most magnificent ecstasy in the world... know how to hold your loved one... don't guess half-truths from unreliable sources... let Dr. H. H. Rubin tell you *what to do and how to do it.*

MORE THAN 100 VIVID PICTURES

The 106 illustrations leave nothing to the imagination... know how to overcome physical misgiving... know what to do on your wedding night to avoid the sorrowing results of ignorance.

Everything pertaining to sex is discussed in daring language. All the things you have wanted to know about your sex life, information about which other books only vaguely hint, is yours at last.

Some will be offended by the amazing frankness of this book and its vivid illustrations, but the world has no longer any use for prudery and false modesty.

A FAMOUS JUDGE SAYS THAT MOST DIVORCES ARE CAUSED BY SEX IGNORANCE!
Normal, sex-witted young people are torn apart because they lack sex knowledge.

WHAT EVERY MAN SHOULD KNOW
The Secret Features
Secrets of the Powerman
Secrets of Love/Worship
Honesty
Venereal Disease

WHAT EVERY WOMAN SHOULD KNOW
Signs of Perfect Mating
What to Allow & Refuse
to do
Seduction
Feminine Mystique
Pregnancy
Birth Control Chart

How to Be a Man
Loved by Women
Should you be a Man
To Gain Control & Gain
The Truth About Abuse

**How to Attract and Hold
Her**
Sexual Energy of Women
Laws of Attraction
The Sex Organ

Knowledge is the basis of the perfect, satisfying love-life. Step out of the darkness into the sunlight... end ignorance, fear and danger today! Money back at once if you are not completely satisfied!

**576 DARING PAGES
106 VIVID PICTURES**

Don't be a slave to ignorance and fear. Enjoy the rapturous delights of the perfect physical love!

Love... scandal... divorce... can often be prevented by knowledge. Only the ignorant pay the awful penalties of wrong sex practices. Read the facts, clearly, startlingly told... study these illustrations and grope in darkness no longer.

You want to know... and you **should** know everything about sex. Sex is no longer a sin... a mystery... it is your greatest power for happiness. You owe it to yourself... to the one you love, to tear aside the curtain of hypocrisy and learn the **hidden truth!**

ATTRACT THE OPPOSITE SEX!
Know how to enjoy the thrilling experiences that are your birthright... know how to attract the opposite sex... how to hold love.

There is no longer any need to pay the awful price for one moment of bliss. Read the scientific pathological facts told so bravely by Dr. Rubin. The chapters on venereal disease are alone worth the price of the book.

IS SEX IGNORANCE DRIVING THE ONE YOU LOVE INTO THE ARMS OF ANOTHER?
Let "Sex Harmony" teach you how easy it is to win and hold your loved one!

THIS BOOK "NOT SOLD TO MINORS"

FREE! NEW BOOK "WHY BIRTH CONTROL?"

"This startling book discusses birth control in an entirely new way... Tells you many things about a much discussed subject... Why Birth Control... will be a revelation to you... See Harmony and Why Birth Control at the reduced price of \$2.98 at the Pioneer Publishing Co. 1270 Sixth Ave. N.Y.C."



**FORMERLY \$5.00
NOW ONLY \$2.98**

SEND NO MONEY... MAIL COUPON TODAY

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.
Dept. 466, 1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N.Y.

Please send me, "Sex Harmony and Eugenics" in plain wrapper, I will pay the postman \$2.98 (plus postage) on delivery. If I am not completely satisfied, I can return the book and the entire purchase price will be refunded immediately. Also send me, FREE OF CHARGE, your book on "Why Birth Control."

Name _____ Age _____
Address _____
Orders from Foreign Countries \$3.45 in advance

Please mention ADVENTURE HOUSE, INC., when answering advertisements.

Image 1 Cutting from George Bruce's Squadron.¹²⁵

Advertising Rubin's book on a full page, it told readers that for less than three dollars, they would be privy to the 'forbidden secrets of sex' and learn 'what to do and how to do it' with the help of more than one hundred 'vivid' pictures. The second, sent with the anonymous letter, reported a marginally different advertisement for the same book in *Star Detective*:

¹²⁵ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from LE to Éamon De Valera (6 December 1936); cutting from *George Bruce's Squadron*, 2:4 (April 1934).

in embrace alongside heavy text describing to the reader in vague, sensationalist terms what information could be found in the book. The third was enclosed with TP's report of *Gang World*:

To-day and To-mo

"Stop Worrying..."

NOW I CAN TELL YOU THE TRUE FACTS ABOUT **SEX!**



WOULD YOU like to know the whole truth about sex? All of the startling facts that even the frankest books have heretofore not dared to print are explained in clear, scientific manner, vividly illustrated, in the revolutionary book—'The New Eugenics'. Here at last, the naked truth stands forth, stripped of all prudery and narrow prejudice. Old fashioned taboos are discarded and the subject of sex is brought out into the bright light of medical science by Dr. C. S. Whitehead M. D., and Dr. Charles A. Hoff, M. D., the authors!

SEX ATTRACTION!
Sex appeal and sex satisfaction are the most powerful forces in your life. To remain in ignorance is to remain in danger of lifelong suffering. It is the purpose of this great book to show sex-ignorant men and women how to enjoy safely the thrilling experiences that are their birth-right. It not only tells you how to attract the opposite sex, but also how to hold the love of your mate throughout a blissful married life.

DANGEROUS!
Unless you know the true facts about sex, ignorance leads to shame, despair, sorrow and remorse.

Do you know how to add variety to your love-making? The most innocent hints may lead to tragedy if you are ignorant of sex relations.

WILLI FEAR!
grip you on your wedding night! ... or will it be the tender, thrilling experience that is your birthright!

SEND NO MONEY!
You send no money—just fill out the coupon below and then when it arrives, in plain wrapper, pay the postman \$1.98. Keep the book five days, then if you are not satisfied send it back and we will refund your money immediately and without question. This book NOT sold to minors.

98 VIVID PICTURES!
PIONEER PUBLISHING COMPANY
Dept. F74 1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N.Y.
Send me the "The New Eugenics" in plain wrapper. I will pay postman \$1.98 (plus postage) on delivery. If I am not completely satisfied, I can return the book within five days and the entire price will be refunded immediately. Also send me, FREE of CHARGE, your book "The Philosophy of Life".

Name _____
Address _____ Age _____
Foreign Orders \$1.25 in advance

Banish Fear and Sex Ignorance Forever!
SEX IS NO LONGER a mysterious sin, mentioned only in the conversational gutters—it is the most powerful force in the world and can be made the most beautiful. Thanks to this bravely written book, it is no longer necessary to pay the awful price for one moment of bliss. Science now lights the path to knowledge and lifelong sex happiness.

LOVE MAKING IS AN ART!
Are you an awkward novice in the art of love-making or a master of its difficult technique? The art of love-making takes skill and knowledge. The sexual embrace practiced by those ignorant of its true scientific importance is crude, awkward and often terrifying to more sensitive natures. Normal sex-suited people are torn apart because they lack the knowledge that makes for a happy sex life!

640 DARING PAGES!

FREE! PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE
This astonishing book, telling frankly and clearly the difference in construction and function of man and woman, is sent without cost to all who order "The New Eugenics" at \$1.98. All about the thrilling mystery of Sex! FREE!

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.
Radio City
1270 Sixth Avenue, New York

FORMERLY \$5.00 NOW ONLY 1.98

Please mention GANG WORLD MAGAZINE when answering advertisements.

Image 3 Cutting from *Gang World*.¹²⁷

Dr Clayton S. Whitehead and Dr Charles A. Hoff's *The New Eugenics: A Safe Guide for Young Men—Young Women* (1932) was advertised in a similar way, but this time with the image of a

¹²⁷ NAI JUS 90/102/28, letter from TP to Seán Lemass (11 August 1934); cutting from *Gang World* (undated, circa 1930s).

young couple being shown the text by a doctor in a white coat.¹²⁸ The advertisements all present captivating allusions to the knowledge the books provide, enticing the reader into a fantasy of American sexual ideals in print.

The tangible information about sex and birth control that readers would gain from these adverts was undeniably limited; they purposefully avoided providing specifics in order to entice and generate book orders. The marketing of sexual knowledge as ‘a sin...a mystery...’ which the advertised books unveiled through ‘amazing frankness’ that ‘daringly revealed’ the ‘naked truth’ made claims about the transformative power of books and access to sexual knowledges.¹²⁹ Employing what Jackson Lears has described as ‘voyeuristic’ advertising, the advertisements encourage consumption through the creation of intrigue.¹³⁰ The use of voyeurism to create intrigue and encourage consumption is evident here. Revealing a little but not too much about its contents packaged in a sensationalist way that tells the reader they *must* buy the book to access something that was once completely forbidden and taboo was an exercise in creating compulsion to buy amongst potential consumers.

How much readers could understand from what was conveyed in advertisements is debatable, emphasising them as not straightforwardly providing access to sexual knowledges. As Kate Fisher has argued, readers had to ‘decode’ and ‘decipher’ information about sex; often, people

¹²⁸ Clayton S. Whitehead and Charles A. Hoff, *The New Eugenics: A Safe Guide for Young Men—Young Women* (Chicago, 1928).

¹²⁹ NAI JUS 90/102/28 cutting from *George Bruce’s Squadron*, 2:4 (April 1934). Punctuation original.

¹³⁰ Jackson Lears, *Fables Of Abundance: A Cultural History Of Advertising In America* (New York, 1994), pp.148-149.

‘struggled to interpret texts that were euphemistic’.¹³¹ Publications about sex could cause confusion and create anxieties, thus as Jonathan Rose has written, ‘whether a book provided much enlightenment’ and what people learnt from them is contested.¹³² Hoggart’s commentary on advertising in pulp magazines and short, sexually explicit books is relevant here. He argued that on a simple level, advertising in such a context appealed ‘to a sense of physical inferiority’, being ‘predominantly compensatory’ to entice readers to consume further cultural products because of perceived deficiencies or issues—in this case, of a sexual nature.¹³³ However, because the advertisements in magazines were reported to the Board, there is a sense that some who encountered them felt even alluding to sexual knowledge in such veiled terms was enough to generate curiosity and transgression.

There are two features at work in these advertisements that attempted to market a specific American presentation of sexuality and the sexual relationship: the visual representation of sex and relationships in the illustrations, and the claims about sexual knowledge and its power made in the written text. The advertising form and content used was part of a wider cultural transformation starting at the turn of the century in the United States where consumers were configured as ‘spectators’; imagery was used to create meaning and encourage ‘pleasurable looking’, tying visual pleasure into encounters with commercialised objects.¹³⁴ These advertisements used drawings of young, attractive couples in different settings. They functioned as both an idealised image of who the book was for—especially in relation to eugenics—and

¹³¹ Kate Fisher, ‘Modern Ignorance’ in Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming and Lauren Kassell, (eds), *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 2018), pp.480-481.

¹³² Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, CN, 2010), p.207.

¹³³ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p.252.

¹³⁴ Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, pp.159-161.

the positive effects it could produce in terms of creating a successful sexual relationship. The embracing couple was contrasted with faces showing expressions of fear, worry, and shame; the adverse effects of lacking sexual knowledge.

As advertisements for eugenics-based texts that encouraged learning about how to conduct a successful marital relationship as well as providing information on preventing unwanted pregnancy, this choice of imagery is unsurprising. Foremost, Lears has argued in his cultural history of North American advertising that advertisements not only ‘urge people to buy goods, but they also signify a certain vision of the good life’.¹³⁵ For eugenicists, this vision was based on the racially ‘pure’ reproduction of able-bodied white Americans, an idea that had deep roots on both sides of the Atlantic in racist, imperialist narratives of the physical and intellectual superiority of white people.¹³⁶ The idea that ‘sex should be harnessed for racial purposes’, as Jane Carey put it, was not a new or uncommon one.¹³⁷ Eugenics was a typical feature of advice texts from America as well as other locations, and was more often than not the basis of advocacy for the dissemination of birth control knowledge.¹³⁸

Displaying the types of white, able-bodied Americans these books were intended to help in advertising perpetuated stereotypes of racial superiority and eugenicist notions of the successful marital relationship that relied on them. Moreover, into the twentieth century, controlling

¹³⁵ Lears, *Fables Of Abundance*, p.1.

¹³⁶ Philippa Levine, ‘Anthropology, Colonialism, and Eugenics’ in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford, 2010), pp.43-61; Marius Turda, ‘Race, Science, and Eugenics in the Twentieth Century’ in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford, 2010), pp.62-79.

¹³⁷ Jane Carey, ‘The Racial Imperatives of Sex: Birth Control and Eugenics in Britain, the United States and Australia in the Interwar Years’, *Women’s History Review*, 21:5 (2012), p.736.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, pp.733-752.

population growth as part of creating a ‘purer and more secure nation’ was the project of America’s economic elites, according to Elizabeth Noren.¹³⁹ A laissez-faire approach to economic management coupled with a belief that financial welfare was a key part of a common American national identity meant definitions of citizenship—and thus who was suitable to reproduce—became inextricably tied to class.¹⁴⁰ Books on sexual relationships and eugenics sold at affordable prices with free birth control tracts thus had a logical home in cheap pulp literature produced with the American working-class audience in mind.¹⁴¹ They appealed to an image of the ideal marital relationship, alongside advice to manage and control fertility for those in the working classes as part of wider eugenic thought on the racial and economic stability of the nation.

Imagery was used to foster a sense of legitimacy around the advice books being marketed, fitting with a wider theme of legitimising scientific sexual knowledge for public consumption in the twentieth century. The *Gang World* advertisement includes the image of a young couple being shown the book by a doctor in spectacles and a white lab coat. The image of ‘friendly family doctor or druggist’ in American advertising is something Lears identified as originating with pharmaceutical company efforts to ‘humanise their operations’ through the ‘borrow[ing] of legitimacy’ of mainstream medical practitioners.¹⁴² In the advertisement of a contraceptive, eugenic-based advice text that claimed subvert prevailing ignorance and taboo around sex, the use of ‘friendly family doctor’ imagery is suggestive of how advertisers sought to negotiate hierarchies of scientific knowledge, the professionalisation of medicine, and the potential

¹³⁹ Elizabeth A. Noren, ‘Nothing Natural: Social Darwinism, scientific racism and eugenics in America’, *Social Sciences Directory*, 2:1 (2013), pp.19-20.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Smith, *Hard-Boiled*, pp.9-10, 44.

¹⁴² Lears, *Fables Of Abundance*, pp.174-175.

reservations or fears of the reading public. Utilising scientific authority to give legitimacy to advice literature was common within advice literature itself and its marketing more broadly.¹⁴³ Specifically, Sarah Jones has argued that advertisements and books from the United States were ‘replete with discussions, allusions, and promises of ‘scientific’ information about sex’, with authors boasting lengthily about their ‘scientific pedigree’.¹⁴⁴ Thus the imagery used in American advice literature advertisements can be positioned as part of this wider phenomenon of drawing on different types of authority to legitimise writing on sex and frame advice books as containing scientific knowledge.

These advertisements also presented sexual knowledge and information about the effects it could have on relationships and life more generally through their written text and linguistic choices. The advertisement in *Squadron* made specific claims about the mental and physical impact of the knowledge Rubin’s contained: readers would ‘avoid the torturing results of ignorance’ on their wedding night, no longer be a ‘*slave* to ignorance and fear’, partake in the ‘rapturous delights of the perfect physical love’, which is the ‘greatest power of happiness’.¹⁴⁵ As work by Matthew Lavine has shown, American advice manuals in the twentieth century rendered sex a ‘perfectible skill’ achievable with the correct information and guidance.¹⁴⁶ In the advertisements detailed, it was purported that the intertwining of the physical and mental

¹⁴³ Porter and Hall, *The Facts of Life*, pp.176-177; Laura Doan, ‘Marie Stopes’s Wonderful Rhythm Charts: Normalizing the Natural’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 78:4 (2017), pp.595-620; ‘Divine Sex, Happy Marriage, Regenerated Nation: Marie Stopes’s Marital Manual ‘Married Love’ and the Making of a Best-Seller, 1918-1955’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8:3 (1998), pp.409-414.

¹⁴⁴ Sarah L. Jones, ‘Science, Sexual Difference and the Making of Modern Marriage in American Sex Advice, 1920-40’, *Gender & History*, 0:0 (2022), p.3.

¹⁴⁵ NAI JUS 90/102/28, cutting from *George Bruce’s Squadron*, 2: 4 (April 1934).

¹⁴⁶ Matthew Lavine, ‘“Advanced Marriage Technique”: Sex as a Perfectible Skill in Mid-twentieth-century American Marriage Manuals’, *Journal of Family History*, 46:4 (2021), pp.391-524.

through the implication that knowledge would lead to successful sex, and thus emotional happiness, creating what Jones has termed the ‘good American marriage’.¹⁴⁷

Broader work on advertising in the United States supports this interpretation. Lears’s analysis of American advertisements across the late-nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. For example, patent medicine advertising of this period melded mental and physical health to display claims for the ‘regenerative powers’ of various medicinal products, selling a fantasy of self-transformation.¹⁴⁸ The notion of ‘rejuvenation’ and physical and emotional vitality was often directly connected to sensual and sexual experiences.¹⁴⁹ Lears often vaguely alludes to twentieth-century ‘advice literature’, but does not write on advertisements for sex advice literature specifically, however, his exploration of advertising for other products illuminates the types of knowledge and claims American advertisers were making.¹⁵⁰ The mentally and physically transformative power of books and knowledge was foregrounded in advertisements for advice literature through the positive language of happiness and fulfilment contrasted with the negative language of fear, ignorance, and shame. This was part of a wider phenomenon Lears identified as the evocation of fantasies of life as it could be through consumerism.¹⁵¹

This framing connects to a spreading obsession in the twentieth century with the self as a project. Greg Eghigian, Andreas Killen, and Christine Leuenberger have argued that by mid-century, the self—meaning the behaviours and inner workings of individuals—became a primary site for ‘ambitious scientific, medical, and political projects’ for charting the future of

¹⁴⁷ Jones, ‘Science, Sexual Difference and the Making of Modern Marriage’, p.1.

¹⁴⁸ Lears, *Fables Of Abundance*, pp.143-144.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.144.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pp.142-153, 165, 169.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

societies across United States and Europe.¹⁵² One part of this was the growing connection between the self, sex and sexuality.¹⁵³ A specific configuration of this was visible in the advertisements, whereby scientific sexual knowledge is the root of self-improvement: ‘Science now lights the path to knowledge and lifelong sex happiness.’¹⁵⁴ The acquisition of scientific knowledge was positioned as a guaranteed way to improve the emotional self, and thus life in general, with sex at the centre.

Thus, both in terms of the imagery and language used, Irish people encountered a vision of American sexual ideals that made specific claims about the power of sexual knowledge and made them privy to a limited amount of information whilst encouraging intrigue and engagement with the products they were advertised. Irish readers may not have always been able to access the actual books, but as my analysis shows, the specific vision of sexual knowledge curated by advertisers they were able to access is significant in and of itself. This illustrates the ways in which the transnational movement of consumer culture in its more ephemeral forms could act as a mode of knowledge circulation that has been underexplored in histories of the circulation of sexual advice books in particular. However, advertising could convey more concrete, specific knowledge to audiences, which I explore in the next section.

¹⁵² Greg Eghigian, Andreas Killen, and Christine Leuenberger, 'Introduction: The Self as Project: Politics and the Human Sciences in the Twentieth Century', *Osiris*, 22:1 (2007), p. 2.

¹⁵³ Ruby Ray Daily, ‘Dear Dr K’: Mobility, Sex, and Selfhood in Alfred Kinsey’s British World Correspondence, 1948-58’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 32:1 (2021), pp.26-27.

¹⁵⁴ NAI JUS 90/102/28, cutting from *Gang World* (undated, circa 1930s).

Advertising Tampax: Working-Class Women and Bodily Knowledge

In 1940, O'Reilly of the CTSI reported a British periodical, *Modern Woman*, one of the 'best magazines of its class', to the Censorship Board for what he believed were offensive advertisements for Tampax tampons and menopause symptom management medications.¹⁵⁵ The 1929 Censorship of Publications Act prohibited advertisements relating to 'the prevention or removal of irregularities in menstruation'.¹⁵⁶ This was coded language for methods to procure abortion, but O'Reilly interpreted it to cover products for management of menstruation and menopause too. The *Modern Woman* magazine O'Reilly reported was part of the 'service' genre that dominated women's publishing in the twentieth century, providing the reader with useful information and entertainment.¹⁵⁷ Aimed at middle-class housewives, it was launched in 1925 and appealed to 'all things modern'.¹⁵⁸

Although my focus in this chapter has so far been advice books and printed advertisements, the advertising of other American products in different ways was also important for the spread of sexual knowledge. American advertisements were printed in British periodicals and magazines that were imported to Ireland as well; as Meany, O'Dowd, and Whelan have argued that British publications were more common than American, it would be erroneous to ignore these.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, whilst advertising was used to sell a specific set of sexual ideals, it was also used to

¹⁵⁵ NAI JUS 90/102/29, letter from Frank O'Reilly (19 June 1940).

¹⁵⁶ Censorship of Publications Act 1929, Part IV, Section 17.1.

¹⁵⁷ Fiona Hackney, "They Opened Up a Whole New World': Narrative, Text and Image in British Women's Magazines in the 1930s", *Working Papers on Design*, 2 (2007), p.3.

¹⁵⁸ Fiona Hackney, "'Women are News': British Women's Magazines 1919-1939" in Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier, (eds), *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms* (Basingstoke, 2008), pp.114-133; Catherine Clay, *Time and Tide: The Feminist and Cultural Politics of a Modern Magazine* (Edinburgh, 2018), p.25.

¹⁵⁹ Meany, O'Dowd and Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman*, pp.132-135.

sell products relating to developing notions of bodily hygiene and cleanliness. The way these understandings circulated through advertising and who amongst is another facet of the development of ideas about bodies and sex in the twentieth century, going beyond the explicitly sexual to encompass new ideas about how bodies worked and should be cared for.

Tampons from brands like Tampax, shown in the advertisement below, were configured as part of a turn towards modernity in women's lives:

ii MODERN WOMAN



"You were wanting to ask about TAMPAX?"

A great many women write to me every week and I am glad. Not only because it shows they are taking an interest in Tampax but because it means that their interest is intelligent and personal.

For ages, you see, women have put up with the clumsy, uncomfortable and troublesome makeshift of the sanitary towel. And now they needn't any more because of Tampax. They are offered an *ideal* form of protection, that is safe, simple, convenient and dainty; no safety pins; no chafing; no uncertainties. It gives a fullness of freedom women have never before been able to enjoy.

And because this is such a new freedom, it is only natural that there should be all sorts of questions that many women want to ask. Sometimes they tell me: "I'm a little nervous of this idea of internal protection; it seems so different." I understand entirely, but as a nurse I can assure them that Tampax is no more than the application of the recognised surgical Tampon to a specialised need. Any doctor will tell you the same.

Now and again also there may be individual problems that call for entirely personal advice. That is one of the special reasons for me! During three years' association with Tampax I have been talking about it to doctors, specialists, matrons and to hundreds of women and girls. And I am confident that it is the best thing that has happened for women in centuries. So please—if you have any question at all about Tampax and its use, do write me fully. Address your letter direct to Nurse Jones; I shall open it myself, and deal with it myself.

Nurse Jones.

NOTE—A genuine sample will be sent to plain wrapper if you enclose 1d. in stamps with your name and address. The offer does not apply to Eire. Write to: NURSE JONES, c/o NAI, 2, C. S. S., Tamper Lodge, Bala Road, North, Dublin.

TAMPAX IS SOLD BY CHEMISTS, DEPARTMENTAL STORES AND DRAPERS. PRICES 1/6, 1/- & 6/6.

All on the march

It's not only women in uniform who are so much more alert; nearly all women are—and many are suffering in consequence. It's nearly always because their shoes are not really comfortable. If they wore Portland shoes they would derive benefit—pleasure, too—from increased activity. Right from the first time on Portland shoes are kind; there's no 'breaking in' to worry busy feet.

Prices from 22/6 to 26/9

No. 1081. Black. Dress or Party shoe. Made and Sold. Close fit. Good last 17 1/2" high.



No. 1082. Black. Dress or Party shoe. Made and Sold. Close fit. Good last 17 1/2" high.



Portland

STYLE · COMFORT SHOES

Send for the attractive and interesting booklet illustrating the wide Spring and Summer range of Portland shoes.

F. ROBERTS & SONS LTD. (DEPT. 28) PORTLAND SHOE WORKS, LEICESTER

ALL ADVERTISEMENTS FOR "MODERN WOMAN" should be addressed ADVERTISEMENT DEPARTMENT, GEORGE NEWNES, LTD., TOWER HOUSE, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND, W.C.2. Tel: TEMPLE BAR 4363

Image 4 Cutting from *Modern Woman*.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ NAI JUS 90/102/29, cutting from *Modern Woman* (July 1940), p.ii.

From the 1930s, the industry for menstrual products expanded astronomically in North America and Western Europe.¹⁶¹ American company Tampax sold the applicator tampon, invented by Dr Earle Haas in 1929 and patented in 1931, and became the recognisable name at the forefront of this growth.¹⁶² Promoting freedom, comfort, and convenience with a personal approach encouraging women to write to ‘Nurse Jones’ with questions, this advertisement was one of a number circulated in periodicals to women in Britain and beyond. For example, other menstrual product companies, like Lil-lets, also advertised in *Modern Woman*:



Image 5 Lil-lets advertisement, *Modern Woman*.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Camilla Mørk Røstvik, ‘Mother Nature as Brand Strategy: Gender and Creativity in Tampax Advertising, 2007-2009’, *Enterprise & Society*, 21:2 (2020), p.420.

¹⁶² Sharra L. Vostral, *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (Lanham, MD, 2008), pp.76-77.

¹⁶³ *Modern Woman* (February, 1947), p.22.

These advertisements foregrounded certifications from medical doctors and nurses to associate tampons with legitimate medical authority and presented new disposable menstrual products as the height of hygiene and modern convenience. The advertising strategies of Tampax—especially towards the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first-century—as well as the history and marketing of menstrual products more generally in America and Britain has been subject to some historical analysis.¹⁶⁴ However, the twentieth century advertising of menstrual products in Ireland does not appear in any of this current scholarship, let alone a consideration of how Tampax advertisements provided access to bodily knowledge in this context.

Menstrual product advertisements presented a specific, commercialised, and feminised framing of women's bodies. In the case of the above Tampax advertisement, this is a personal approach to reproductive and sexual health that makes menstruation a topic of public conversation. As Sharra Vostral has argued, menstrual product advertising 'provides one of the best examples of the way women construed their physical experiences through public discourse about private bodily functions.'¹⁶⁵ Thus it is a pertinent mode through which to understand the types of bodily knowledge women were encountering through advertising, and how this shaped narratives and

¹⁶⁴ For examples, see David Linton, 'Men in Menstrual Product Advertising—1920-1949', *Women & Health*, 46:1 (2007), pp.99-114; Shelley M. Park, 'From Sanitation to Liberation?: The Modern and Postmodern Marketing of Menstrual Products', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30:2 (1996), pp.149-168; Daisy Payling, 'Selling Shame: Feminine Hygiene Advertising and the Boundaries of Permissiveness in 1970s Britain', *Gender & History*, 0:0 (2022), pp.1-22; Camilla Mørk Røstvik, *Cash Flow: The Business of Menstruation* (London, 2022); Røstvik, 'Mother Nature as Brand Strategy', pp.413-452; Camilla Mørk Røstvik, 'Tampon Technology in Britain: Unilever's Project Hyacinth and the "7-Day War" Campaign, 1968-1980', *Technology and Culture*, 63:1 (2022), pp.61-86.

¹⁶⁵ Sharra L. Vostral, 'Conspicuous Menstruation: The history of menstruation and menstrual hygiene products in America, 1870-1960', PhD thesis, Washington University in St. Louis, 2000, p.128.

knowledge of bodies more broadly. However, as Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth have noted, in Tampax advertisements from the 1930s into the 1960s, menstruation was primarily discussed through euphemisms. Advertising stressed the individual burden of the woman to be beautiful, clean, and handle the embarrassing process of menstruation discreetly.¹⁶⁶

Hygiene and cleanliness were placed at the forefront of the appeal of tampons; they were discrete, comfortable, and safe ‘protection’ from the discomfort and uncertainty of menstruation. Shelley Park has called hygiene and health a ‘national obsession’ in America by the 1920s, highlighting how these advertisements fit in with a broader culture of managing the unseemly bodily processes that interrupted a full modern life of work and domesticity.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, Vostral’s extensive work on the history of menstruation and menstrual hygiene products in America has foregrounded the notion of ‘menstrual debility’ as shaping early narratives around the effects of menstruation and consequently, the ways in which could be managed.¹⁶⁸ The idea that menstruation was physically and mentally debilitating, and thus to be considered a sickness, was dominant in medical and social understandings of menstruation until the Second World War. Manufacturers like Tampax positioned their products as a direct way to navigate ‘menstrual debility’ in a delicate, feminine way both before and after the 1940s.¹⁶⁹ This explicitly gendered and euphemistic framing is visible in the *Modern Woman* advertisements, where discretion and the need for a ‘dainty’, feminine solution to an uncomfortable problem is the appeal of the products.

¹⁶⁶ Janice Delaney, Mary Lupton and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (Urbana, 1988), pp.130-132.

¹⁶⁷ Park, ‘From Sanitation to Liberation?’, p.154.

¹⁶⁸ Vostral, ‘Conspicuous Menstruation’, pp.25-68.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pp.viii, 23, 119-161.

Menstrual product advertising was not only gendered in its focus on hygiene, but it was also racialised and imbued with class assumptions. Products like Tampax tampons were part of efforts to ‘civilize the body and elevate it from its most banal processes,’ Vostral has noted, with a fixation on hygiene that encapsulated and perpetuated the racial and class ideals of white, middle-class bodies.¹⁷⁰ Tampon advertisements appearing in ‘service genre’ magazines like *Modern Woman* showed to their intended audience of middle-class housewives in Britain the most efficient, modern, and appropriately feminine ways of managing their bodies as part of broader efforts towards maintaining civilised, white society.¹⁷¹ Thus whilst these advertisements presented bodily knowledge, it was in a veiled way that reinforced a set of bodily ideals for women embedded with dominant racial and class assumptions.

‘The lady demonstrated the article’: Tampax Advertising in 1950s Dublin Factories

Placing these advertisements into the Irish context—where they were most certainly found, based on reports to the Censorship Board—raises questions about who these ideals were promoted to, and who was able to access bodily knowledge through them. Although *Modern Woman* was explicitly aimed at middle-class housewives in Britain, archival evidence illustrates how Tampax reached wider audiences with its advertising efforts into the 1950s. Between 1956 and 1959, the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid received three letters complaining about different Tampax advertisements.¹⁷² The first reported British newspaper the

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p.126-127.

¹⁷¹ Hackney, “They Opened Up a Whole New World”, p.3; Hackney, ““Women are News”, pp.114-133; Clay, *Time and Tide*, p.25.

¹⁷² Dublin Diocesan Archives, John Charles McQuaid Papers (henceforth: IE/DDA).

Evening Mail and named a list of ‘various cheap books and periodicals’ where similar ‘prominently displayed’ advertisements inside ‘strikingly bright cover[s]’ were found available in ‘every paper shop’: ‘Since all these books are printed in England there can be nothing done about them when the Censorship Board lets them through.’¹⁷³ This complaint emphasised the widespread availability of advertisements for menstrual products in Ireland by the 1950s. They were in cheaply accessible publications sold in most paper shops, imported from England, with no possibility of action by the State to prevent them circulating. The description of the distribution of these publications is strikingly similar to the details provided in the letters about advice literature advertisements in Woolworth’s, thus it can be argued that tampon advertisements would have been available to many Irish people across class and age boundaries, and of different genders.

More significantly, the other two letters received by McQuaid describe another advertising strategy used by Tampax that provides an insight into how their products were part of education about bodies for young working-class women in Ireland. A lecturer was sent by Tampax to the Bespoke Clothing Factory in Dublin in 1956 to advertise their products to the staff:

We had a visit from a lady who purported to give lectures on fashion and Hygiene. A large crowd of the staff gathered for the lecture after working hours. This turned out to be an advertisement for a sanitary product called “Tampax”. The lady demonstrated the use of the article to an extent, and presented each one present with a sample.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ IE/DDA/AB8/B/XXV/333b/2, letter to John Charles McQuaid (9 December 1956).

¹⁷⁴ IE/DDA/AB8/B/XXV/333b/1, letter to John Charles McQuaid (18 November 1956).

She lectured to ‘quite a number of young girls’ from the ages of fourteen and fifteen, and the author goes on to state that the lecturer was to visit ‘all the large factories’.¹⁷⁵ The second letter from 1959—addressed to a Dr Lee and passed on to McQuaid—was similar, but did not name a specific factory where the lecture took place. The author claimed to write on behalf of her friend:

This friend is the staff welfare nurse in one of our big city factories - part of an English combine. She has information that lecturers are coming over from England to speak to the girls working in Dublin factories workshops on the delicate subject of sanitary protection during the difficult days in the month. They are being sent by a firm which makes a product called “Tampax” and she knows this is only an effort to boost [sic] sales, but is cleverly disguised to look like a helping hand.¹⁷⁶

The writer went on to explain the dangers of Tampax tampons: they were used internally and could cause ‘serious sins of impurity by arousing passion’ if used ‘indiscriminate[ly]’. This claim, she stated, was made by a Priest lecturing at St. Mary’s College, Rathmines, when Tampax first appeared on the Irish market.¹⁷⁷ These fears of stimulation reflected understandings of arousal that focused on penetration and dormancy. Tropes of the latent nature of female sexuality existed in sexological and cultural discourses from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century. For instance, Chiara Beccalossi has explained how medical, educational, and other authorities in Britain were preoccupied by the potential for female

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ IE/DDA/AB8/B/XXV/333c/3, letter to Dr Lee (29 March 1959).

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

sexuality to be ‘awoken’ through adolescent experiences in particular.¹⁷⁸ The pervasive nature of these fears further into the twentieth century and across different national contexts is evident in these letters, with tampons being configured as dangerous objects foremost because of their perceived potential to disturb the dormant sexuality of young women.

These letters reveal another advertising technique used by Tampax in Ireland that was both marketing and education. Women factory workers were introduced to Tampax as a branded product, including samples, alongside being told how to properly use tampons to manage menstrual blood. Whilst the second letter-writer viewed these lectures perhaps cynically as profit-boosting efforts veiled as education, the function of advertising in this context as education regardless of the company’s intents is visible. The two authors described their distaste and concern for the factory lectures in terms of the ‘delicate’ subject of menstruation that was discussed and the morally reprehensible effects they may have on young women. However, their descriptions also reveal that the talks attracted ‘large crowds’ of staff who descended into conversation about Tampax, highlighting how these public advertising efforts created conversation and knowledge around bodily reproductive processes.

The lectures taking place in the space of a factory where staff were predominantly working-class women—and some younger girls—is significant for thinking about who advertising could reach, and thus who it could spread bodily knowledge to. Unlike the letters about Woolworth’s or even *Modern Woman*, there is an explicit indication here of who was accessing and engaging with Tampax’s advertisements. Furthermore, the lectures occurred in multiple factories across

¹⁷⁸ Chiara Beccalossi, *Female Sexual Inversion: Same-Sex Desires in Italian and British Sexology, c. 1870-1920* (Basingstoke, 2012), pp.107-113.

the city, potentially capturing a wide range of women into the audiences in these different spaces. ‘Tampax Ladies’ who travelled to schools and factories in Britain and the United States as part of its education service to deliver lectures were an important part of the company’s advertising efforts from the 1940s.¹⁷⁹ As Eilidh Macrae has noted in relation to Scotland, public lectures were a common aspect of Tampax’s sales techniques in the 1950s. Representatives would ‘occasionally be invited to come and speak to groups of adolescent schoolgirls, partly as a sales technique but also for educational purposes.’¹⁸⁰

There is evidence of the transformative nature of these lectures for the audience. In Macrae’s oral history interviews which focused on how girls experienced and learnt about their bodies at school in post-war Scotland, one interviewee recalled the ‘disbelief’ that she and her classmates had towards the Tampax lecturer.¹⁸¹ From the letters to McQuaid, it is evident that some attendees of the factory lectures were shocked or surprised by the nature of the information they were being presented with. That they thought these lectures could provide young women with knowledge about products that would lead to sexual transgression is indicative of the perceived power of advertising products related to the body, even those that were not inherently sexualised. Moreover, the religious reaction to the advertising of tampons to Irish women from the 1940s was premised on the belief that they could act as a gateway to sexual transgression. McQuaid disapproved of the use of tampons and demanded their sale be discontinued. As Edna

¹⁷⁹ Danda Humphreys, ‘Careers extraordinary: One over the Eight of a team of travelling teachers’, *Nursing Times*, 68:19 (1972), p.578; Tampax, ‘The History of Tampax’. Available at: <https://tampax.co.uk/en-gb/history-of-tampax-tampons/> (Accessed: 19 July 2023). There are few histories of Tampax advertising that do not come from the company—or its parent company, Procter & Gamble—itsself. Their archives are company use only, thus sources are limited: Røstvik, ‘Mother Nature as Brand Strategy’, pp.414-416.

¹⁸⁰ Eilidh H.R. Macrae, ‘Exercise and education: facilities for the young female body in Scotland, 1930-1960’, *History of Education*, 41:6 (2012), p.768.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

O'Brien has explained, his reasoning was that: '[...] they were in danger of stimulating girls at an impressionable age and could eventually lead them into acquiring contraceptives [...] to satisfy their dangerously aroused passions.'¹⁸² Through this reasoning, the bodily was intrinsically tied to the sexual, and young, impressionable, and sexually pure women were placed at the centre of Catholic paranoia about the implications of bodily knowledge.

These factory advertisements for menstrual products therefore broaden our historical understanding of the spaces where sexual and bodily knowledges could be and were encountered in the ROI in the mid-twentieth century. Whilst chain stores were significant in their own way, the space of a factory as an everyday location of work transformed into a place of learning about bodies through advertising lectures gives a sense of how a wider range of people were able to develop bodily knowledge. The combining of educational and promotional efforts can be positioned as an important part of the development of advertising in the menstrual product industry in this period, and one which reached women of various ages through their spaces of work and education. Although the advertising of Tampax is different to the advertising of advice literature in some ways, such as being more focused on hygiene and convenience than sex and successful marriage, the explicit concern for the moral impact of Tampax in the letters is suggestive of how bodily education was tied into sexual knowledge. This sexualisation of the reproductive body and menstrual hygiene is something still visible in reactions to Tampax advertisement in Ireland as recent as 2020, when the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland (ASAI) banned a television advertisement where correct insertion of tampons was discussed explicitly for causing 'widespread offence' after eighty-four complaints. Viewers

¹⁸² O'Brien, *Country Girl*, p.88.

found the advertisement ‘provocative’, ‘suggestive’, and filled with sexual innuendo.¹⁸³ Whilst the ASAI rejected these claims, it nevertheless banned the advertisement, highlighting how the connections drawn between bodily and sexual knowledge are not just a historical phenomenon.¹⁸⁴

Whilst maintaining my focus on American advertising in this section, I have also acknowledged the importing of British publications as a means of access. American advertising was only one place where ideas about sex, bodies, and desires were presented to Irish people. I have also highlighted the importance of thinking about sexual knowledge outside of the realm of the explicitly sexualised: bodily knowledge gained through advertising was equally important, and as shown by the Tampax factory lectures, could reach a specific working-class female audience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has asked what we can understand differently about the circulation of sexual knowledges if we centre advertising as a form of access. Considering the landscape of censorship in Ireland between the 1930s and 1960s, advertising was an important medium through which Irish people encountered emerging discourses around sex, bodies, and desires, albeit in a mediated sense. Sensationalist, voyeuristic advertising in imported American pulp fiction magazines in Woolworth’s shops throughout Ireland is an unrecognised context for this phenomenon and speaks to the multiple cultural meanings that such advertising could have,

¹⁸³ Amy O’Connor, ‘Tampax’s TV ad has been banned. Get a grip, Ireland’, *Irish Times* (30 June 2020). Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/tampax-s-tv-ad-has-been-banned-get-a-grip-ireland-1.4317651> (Accessed: 11 January 2022).

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

from imparting ideals of American sexuality to anxieties around the reading habits and morals of young, working-class men and women in particular.

Advertisements for menstrual products in British magazines, periodicals, and newspapers illustrates the multifaceted functions of advertising in this context. In particular, Tampax advertisements aimed specifically at women imparted ideas about feminine hygiene and shaped understandings of how bodies should be managed and cared for. Lectures by ‘Tampax Ladies’ in Dublin factories expand definitions of advertising and illustrate clearly its dual educational and marketing functions. Through reports of these lectures to Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, we can understand how Tampax advertising in this way created anxieties surrounding sexual transgression, youthful sexuality, and women’s bodies in particular, as the advertisements took place in factories where the primary workforce was young, working-class women.

In exploring these themes, this chapter makes a case for the significance of understanding the circulation of sexual knowledges as a transnational process facilitated and enabled by the spread and exchange of consumer culture between different national contexts—Ireland, Britain, and the United States in this case. In doing so, I have highlighted the porosity of national borders, the multiple and varied interactions between these different cultural contexts, and the ephemeral ways in which sexual knowledges could be encountered through books and advertising. This nuances understandings of the circulation of sexual knowledges both within particular national contexts and between them, showing not only how advice books and their content produced for nationally specific audiences translated into other contexts, but the different cultural meanings and anxieties they then reflected and encouraged.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE 'AFTERLIVES' OF ADVICE CULTURE: ENGAGEMENTS WITH SEXUAL ADVICE IN THE ARCHIVE OF DR HELENA WRIGHT

The 'Pioneer' of Family Planning

In September 1977, birth control activist and doctor Helena Wright turned ninety years old. In a tribute to her significant contributions to British and international family planning activism and services, she was profiled in *The Sunday Times Magazine's* 'Lifespan' column. Described by journalist Jane McKerron as a 'pioneer' of the birth control movement, Wright was characterised as a radical well ahead of her time who was often out to shock. Her diminutive stature in her old age contrasted her charismatic presence: 'She is tiny but erect, her hazel eyes are clear and direct and there is an imperious touch about her bearing and tone.'¹ Her 'prescription' for patients at her family planning clinic had been consistent since the 1930s: 'sex before marriage, planned parenthood, and no sexual possessiveness.'² Through her 'Lifespan' profile, Wright's life reads as full, ambitious, and significant in the context of the family planning movement; age did not seem to dull her spirit or moderate her sexual advice, with McKerron's interview continuing to construct her role as a prominent sex radical of the century.

¹ Wellcome Collection (henceforth: Wellcome), Helena Wright Papers (henceforth: PP/HRW), PP/HRW/A.5, Jane McKerron, 'Lifespan: Dr Helena Wright, a pioneer of contraception since the Thirties, will be 90 on Saturday. A profile by Jane McKerron. The Wright approach to birth control', *The Sunday Times Magazine* (11 September 1977), p.19.

² Ibid.

Following her retirement from her women's clinic in 1975, Wright continued her involvement in the broader family planning and advice movement until her death at age ninety-three in 1982. In these final years, she retained her public profile through a handful of radio and television appearances—in addition to the 'Lifespan' profile—which solidified and served as a reminder of her defining role in family planning and the process of 'sexual revolution' attached to the latter half of the twentieth century.³ In her centenary year, 1987, further tributes were written to her life and work.⁴ Memorialising a life deeply intertwined with evolving sexual culture and marital advice in Britain and beyond across the twentieth century, Wright left behind an incomplete yet rich archive that includes obituaries, letters celebrating her ninetieth birthday, and ephemeral correspondence spanning from the 1930s to the 1970s, where many of her correspondents wrote of themselves as sexual subjects in relation to advice culture.⁵ This chapter's focus is therefore on how advice and its producers were memorialised as part of narratives of sexual revolution, but also on the functions of letter writing as both productive and expressive for those who encountered advice culture. It shifts perspective to consider in more depth how knowledge was co-produced with readers and patients, going beneath the narrative in popular culture of a sexual revolution driven by key figures to engage with the lived experience of everyday encounters with advice culture.

³ Barbara Evans, *Freedom to Choose: The Life and Work of Dr Helena Wright, Pioneer of Contraception* (London, 1984), pp.251-265. Helena Wright appeared on multiple BBC radio programmes towards the end of her career, including: Richard Keen, producer, 'What Happened to Authority?', *BBC Radio 4* (15 September 1970); Sue MacGregor, presenter, 'Woman's Hour: Dr Helena Wright', *BBC Radio 4* (12 November 1980). She also took part in a BBC Two television series special for *Yesterday's Witness* in 1969: Stephen Peet, producer, 'Yesterday's Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties', *BBC Two* (21 April 1969). On the historiography of the 'sexual revolution', see Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford, 2004).

⁴ Wellcome, Philip Rainsford Evans and Barbara Evans Papers (henceforth: PP/PRE), PP/PRE/J.1/13.

⁵ PP/HRW was left to Wellcome by Wright's biographer, Barbara Evans.

As a detailed case study of Wright's papers, this chapter explores the ways in which different temporalities—individual biographies, the sexual life cycle, and narratives of sexual change—come together in the archive to illustrate the private and public resonances of advice culture originating from the interwar years. It centres letter writing by both men and women as a mode of engagement with advice literature specifically and advice culture more broadly. As Jeffrey Weeks has argued, writing about sex can be 'constitutive'. Whilst his argument is made in the context of writing about sexuality in a more academic sense, if writing about sex can be understood as shaping 'beliefs and behaviours' and refining what sexuality is and means to both society and the individual, letter writing in this context was an important way for people to explore, explain, and organise understandings of their sexual selves.⁶ As such, it can be understood as a psychological exercise that could be used to transform 'the psychic reality' of sexual experience, in the words of Michael Roper.⁷ The specificity of letters as part of women's relational and emotional worlds was, for a long time, at the forefront of feminist claims about the importance of correspondence-based sources, but analysis of advice literature correspondence by Lesley Hall set an example for expanding our understandings of men's relational and emotional worlds too, elucidating the varying functions letters had when men came into contact with sexual advice.⁸

⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge, 2000), p.2.

⁷ Michael Roper, 'Splitting in Unsent Letters: Writing as a Social Practice and a Psychological Activity', *Social History*, 26:3 (2001), pp.319-321.

⁸ For a summary of debates about the gendered specificity of letter writing originating from 1980s feminist histories, see Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (Columbia, 2008), pp.80-85; Lesley Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (Cambridge, 1991).

I argue that letter writing in the context of Wright's archive was a story-telling tool that relied on reference points from the sexual life cycle to enable correspondents to fashion themselves as sexual subjects. Ken Plummer has defined 'sexual story-telling' as the process of narrating 'intimate life, focused especially around the erotic, the gendered, and the relational'.⁹ Understanding letter writing as a psychological story-telling exercise that shaped the sexual self thus emphasises why the correspondence in Wright's archive is so important. In the context of the long-term significance of advice culture, these letters reveal the thoughts, feelings, and knowledges that expose what encountering sexual advice meant on an individual level. Moreover, since several of the letters in this archive reflect on the individual sexual life cycle from the vantage point of the 1970s, they also illuminate how sexual story-telling in letters has been used by private individuals to form and insert themselves into narratives of changing sexual culture in the twentieth century.

In doing so, Wright's archive, spanning from the 1930s to 1980s, reveals the 'afterlives' of interwar advice literature as the century drew on, to co-opt Frank Mort's phrasing.¹⁰ By resisting seeing advice in a temporal vacuum in this way, the wider narrative of changing sexual culture is visible. Although it is important to acknowledge that this archive is incomplete owing to Wright's destruction of many of her records upon retirement, the timespan of this collection is unique.¹¹ The comparable Marie Stopes papers at the Wellcome Collection stretch only into the 1950s, around the time of her death.¹² A reliance on this comparable but much larger Marie Stopes correspondence archive—praised by historians such as Lesley Hall and Lisa Sigel for

⁹ Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London, 1995), p.6.

¹⁰ Frank Mort, 'Victorian Afterlives: Sexuality and identity in the 1960s and 1970s', *History Workshop Journal*, 82:1 (2016), pp.199-212.

¹¹ Wellcome, PP/HRW, acquisition note.

¹² Wellcome, Marie Stopes Papers, PP/MCS.

its scope and scale—has obscured smaller collections in histories of advice literature.¹³ A detailed reading of Wright’s correspondence and ephemera alongside other sources therefore speaks to the *longue durée* of advice culture in ways unrepresented in the larger collections.

This chapter reveals the mythologising and remaking of Wright as a pioneering ‘sex expert’ by patients, biographers, colleagues, and journalists, exposing the ways in which the individual *and* collective cultural significance of advice culture has been constructed, reflected on, and memorialised. First, I examine biographies, obituaries, and other ephemera to deconstruct the ways in which Wright, her publications, and her clinical practice has been written and rewritten retrospectively. I argue that these sources encompass a narrativization of Wright’s life that maps onto a teleology of sexual revolution across the twentieth century. However, I also demonstrate how this narrative has been moderated by historians and other commentators on Wright’s life to complicate the notion of progressive change and the ‘sex expert’ as a path-breaking, pioneering figure.

Following this, I take four case studies of correspondence with Wright to draw out the relationship between engaging with advice culture, interpreting published sexual knowledges, and the negotiation of the boundaries of the sexual self in letter writing. Following Ruby Ray Daily’s method using the Alfred Kinsey correspondence archive, I have selected only letters from ‘private individuals’ to focus on the relationship between advice culture and those it was intended to support, rather than sexological or medical experts who also engaged with it.¹⁴ First,

¹³ Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*, p.10; Lisa Z. Sigel, *Making Modern Love: Sexual Narratives and Identities in Interwar Britain* (Philadelphia, 2012), p.47. See also Ruth Hall, *Dear Dr Stopes: Sex in the 1920s* (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp.7-8.

¹⁴ Ruby Ray Daily, “Dear Dr K’: Mobility, Sex, and Selfhood in Alfred Kinsey’s British World Correspondence, 1948-58’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 32:1 (2021), p.28.

I explore letters as a confessional space, drawing on both Michel Foucault's critique of the 'repression hypothesis' and Deborah Cohen's argument that twentieth-century Britain evolved a mass market 'confessional culture' to contend with the impetus towards sexual silence.¹⁵ Focusing on the unstable and tricky interplay between women, femininity, and sexuality in the interwar years, I argue that letter writing held significant weight for younger women experiencing and internalising sexual desire in their relationships with men. The next two case studies examine men's letter writing. Building on recent work on the phenomenon of complaint, I consider its role in managing changing sexual dynamics and feelings of compromised masculinity.¹⁶ Then, returning to recent historiography unpicking the porous boundaries of expertise, I show how letters critiquing 'sex experts' functioned to forge expertise for lay readers, illustrating the active and responsive ways advice literature was engaged with.¹⁷

The final section examines a set of letters sent to Wright by her former (female) patients in celebration of her ninetieth birthday, analysing how correspondents wrote themselves into narratives of sexual change through telling stories of their sexual lives and pinpointing Wright's relationship to their reproductive life cycles in letter writing. This analysis illustrates that advice culture had profound and enduring impacts on those who encountered it. Returning to the resonance of interwar and post-war advice into the late-twentieth century, I show that Wright's

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will To Knowledge*, first published 1976 (London, 1998), pp. 17-21; Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: The Things We Tried to Hide* (London, 2013), pp.xii, 181.

¹⁶ Chelsea Saxby, 'Making Love on British Telly: Watching Sex, Bodies and Intimate Lives in the Long 1970s', University of Birmingham, PhD thesis, 2020; Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham, 2021); Daisy Payling, "'The People Who Write to Us Are the People Who Don't Like Us': Class, Gender, and Citizenship in the Survey of Sickness, 1943-1952, *Journal of British Studies*, 59:2 (2020), pp.315-342.

¹⁷ Katy Price, *Loving Faster Than Light: Romance and Readers in Einstein's Universe* (Chicago, 2012); Matthew Wale, *Making Entomologists: How Periodicals Shaped Scientific Communities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Pittsburgh, 2022).

archive is valuable for its illustration of the ‘afterlives’ of advice culture and literature in both private and public spheres.¹⁸ In doing so, I demonstrate that taking a *long durée* approach to histories of advice—resisting seeing it as of a particular time—and placing it into the context of a wider narrative of change gives substance to our understanding of the multiple roles and meanings of advice culture in the making of sexual culture and the development of discourses around sex, bodies, and desires in twentieth-century Britain.

Mythologising the Sex Expert

Sex experts, birth control activists, and others involved in the broad marital and sexual reform movement in the twentieth century have often been mythologised for their contributions to evolving sexual culture as well as individual sexual lives; Wright is no exception. Her career and advice became part of the history of advice culture in twentieth-century Britain—as well as on an international scale due to her work abroad. Wright’s continued engagement with sexual advice and family planning post-retirement and until her death, bolstered by the aforementioned media appearances and profiles, is evidence of the ‘afterlives’ of mid-century advice culture.

Beyond the ‘Lifespan’ profile described in the introduction to this chapter, the gravity of Wright’s impact on the family planning world was subject to significant conversation in print media and correspondence around her ninetieth birthday and following her death in 1982. Consistently, she was characterised as a leader of the family planning movement, admired for her activism, tenacity, and medical expertise. For instance, Evans’s biography—a deeply detailed and at times personal tribute to Wright as her neighbour and eventually friend published

¹⁸ Mort, ‘Victorian Afterlives’, pp.199-212.

two years after her death—labelled her a ‘pioneer’ who made ‘contraception respectable at a time when the subject was virtually unmentionable’.¹⁹ According to Evans, Wright’s impact lay in her ability to gradually shift the medical hierarchy’s opinions on contraception, and she was ‘a truly remarkable Victorian with twentieth-century vision’, rooting her career and beliefs firmly in the narrative of sexual change across this period.²⁰

Similarly, *People* magazine memorialised her as a ‘forthright crusader for over half a century in the cause of controlling fertility and one of the prime movers in the creation of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)’.²¹ Her involvement in the running of the IPPF dominated many of her obituaries, perhaps unsurprisingly, as many were produced by the IPPF or those who worked within it. For example, her obituary in the *IPPF Medical Bulletin* foregrounded her work for them, stating that the impact of her death would be felt deeply within the organisation: ‘Though one can take her place as a leader, fighter and much-loved teacher, we who are now working in this field will do our best to follow her great example.’²² Following her obituary in *People* magazine, Vera Houghton, former IPPF Executive Secretary, wrote to the magazine detailing the practical and organisational contributions Wright made to growing the IPPF and her dedication to the cause which allowed the Federation to grow ‘out of all recognition’ and pioneer the common cause of family planning.²³ Aziza Hussein, a birth control

¹⁹ Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, p.7. See also Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, Barbara Evans, ‘Obituary: Helena Wright MB BS’, *Women in Medicine*, 1:3 (Winter 1982), pp.19-20.

²⁰ Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, pp.7, 9.

²¹ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, ‘Obituary: Helena Wright’, *People*, 9:2 (1982), p. 42. On the specifics of Wright’s role in the British Family Planning Association (FPA) and subsequently the formation of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), see Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, pp.206-236.

²² Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, Ronald L. Kleinman, ‘Death of Dr Helena Wright—pioneer of family planning’, *IPPF Medical Bulletin*, 16:2 (April 1982), p.4.

²³ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, ‘Letters: Helena Wright, Vera Houghton’, *People*, 9:4 (1982), p. 2. Vera Houghton was Secretary for the International Committee on Planned Parenthood (ICPP),

activist who became Vice President of the IPPF in 1963, also wrote to Wright's son Beric Wright in a professional capacity, citing her long-term contributions to family planning that extended to way before the formation of the IPPF, as well as her sustained service to the organisation.²⁴

Historians have continued to emphasise Wright's centrality to the evolution of family planning, especially in the post-war world. For instance, Caroline Rusterholz places Wright as one of four English women doctors who were 'decisive agents for the medicalisation of birth control at international conferences', citing her work with the IPPF after the Second World War as her foremost contribution to changing birth control access and patterns on a national and international scale.²⁵ Throughout, Wright's medical expertise and the respect she earned as a doctor is evident. For instance, Rusterholz noted that her profile as a medical expert was important enough that she was chosen to speak on the topic over male doctor Norman Haire at a 1932 conference hosted by the National Birth Control Association.²⁶ These obituaries, biographies, and histories tie the trajectory of Wright's biographical life firmly into the evolution of the family planning movement across the twentieth century. Placing her as an agent in the transformation of ideas, services, and organisations, the significance of Wright's

which then became the IPPF in 1953, where she continued this role full-time as Executive Secretary until 1959. On this, and Houghton's wider role in the IPPF, see: Suzie Hayman, 'Vera Houghton obituary', *The Guardian* (15 December 2013). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/dec/15/vera-houghton> (Accessed: 1 March 2023). See also Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, p. 209.

²⁴ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, letter from Aziza Hussein to Beric Wright (November 1982). On Aziza Hussein, see Beth Baron, 'The Origins of Family Planning: Aziza Hussein, American Experts, and the Egyptian State', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 4:3 (2008), pp.31-57.

²⁵ Caroline Rusterholz, 'English Women Doctors, Contraception and Family Planning in Transnational Perspective (1930s-1970s)', *Medical History*, 63:2 (2019), pp.154, 157-158.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp.164-165.

interventions in this context are acute; the implication is that without Wright, the family planning movement would not have formed and developed as it did.

Tributes to Wright frequently credited her gender for her ability and motivations to craft a career in family planning. Hussein's letter illustrated this: 'As a doctor, she held a deep understanding and knowledge of the problems faced by women who lacked the means to control their own fertility, and, as a woman, she fought steadily all her life for their rights in this and other spheres.'²⁷ Evans noted that Wright was trained as a doctor in spaces predominantly occupied by women, shaping the direction of her professional life, and herself believed that women spoke freely to her *because* she was a woman.²⁸ Supporting the argument that her impact was in part because of her position as a woman, Rusterholz argued that women doctors became 'decisive agents' in medicalised birth control because not only were they assigned to medical fields 'supposedly in line with their 'feminine nature', but because of their desire to help other women.²⁹

Whilst gender was something Wright's supporters and biographers have identified as underpinning the significance of her work, many go beyond this to emphasise her personality, character, and approach to clinical practice as distinctive. Her obituary in *The Times* contrasted her ability to relate to women as a woman with her rejection of the trappings of femininity and her outspoken nature, stating that she 'eschewed [...] concern over personal appearance and dress. Her appearance was as clinical as her approach to her field [...]', paired with a 'forceful

²⁷ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, letter from Aziza Hussein to Beric Wright (November 1982).

²⁸ Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, pp.63, 148.

²⁹ Rusterholz, 'English Women Doctors', p.154.

personality’ and ability to approach problems in a ‘no-nonsense way’.³⁰ However, this side of her personality was always mirrored with a kindness and care that Evans believed made her unique, especially in contrast to the better-known Marie Stopes, whose ‘aggressive egomania’ made her a more difficult figure.³¹

Patient letters from her ninetieth birthday emphasised the comforting, approachable environment Wright created at her clinics. For instance, one correspondent wrote: ‘You were very kind, & gave me tea! Since then I visited you regularly at Weymouth St. [...] I expect thousands seeing your face are inspired like myself [...]’.³² Moreover, her ability to relate to and support her patients was grounded in her position as the ‘mother’ of family planning, according to her *British Medical Journal* obituary: she was a ‘loveable, warm person who related to people instantly’, a mothering figure who referred to her patients ‘affectionately’ as ‘chicks’.³³ Similarly, another correspondent wrote affectionately: ‘As one of [your] “girls” from the old days it was especially good to know that you are exactly the same [...]’.³⁴ The highly gendered nature of these descriptions reinforce Wright’s role as a woman in family planning, but importantly, they suggest her unique impact lay in her ability to both encapsulate and reject feminine qualities simultaneously. The complexity of Wright’s personality—from forthright to kind and even motherly—thus became important in how she was mythologised during her final years and following her death.

³⁰ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, ‘Obituary: Dr Helena Wright: Stalwart pioneer of birth control’, *The Times* (circa 1982).

³¹ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, Barbara Evans, ‘Obituary: Helena Wright MB BS’, *Women in Medicine*, 1:3 (Winter 1982), p.19.

³² Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.5, anonymous letter to Helena Wright (11 September 1977).

³³ ‘Obituary: Helena R. Wright, MB, BS’, *British Medical Journal*, 284 (1982), p. 1051.

³⁴ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.5, letter from KH to Helena Wright (14 September 1977).

Tributes to Wright also identify her contributions to the production and spread of marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice literature in the interwar and post-war periods, albeit this formed a smaller part of her obituaries than her medical and family planning work. For instance, the *Times* included the publication of *Sex Factor* in 1930 and *Sex and Society* in 1968 as notable moments in her career which showcased her ‘characteristically plain’ and ‘forward-looking and pioneering outlook’ on sex and marriage.³⁵ Similarly *People* magazine remarked that *Sex Factor* was ‘so revolutionary’ it risked censorship, going on to sell almost a quarter of a million copies, whilst in *Sex and Society* continued to be ‘as unconventional as ever’.³⁶

Historians have continued to emphasise the importance of Wright’s advice books and the controversial, unconventional nature of her approach to sex and marriage. For instance, Kate Fisher and Hera Cook have both noted her publications as major interventions that contributed to the popularity and expansion of advice literature, the latter commenting on Wright’s ‘scepticism about conventional heterosexual masculine and feminine roles’ as a unique part of her writing, using her emphasis on clitoral masturbation to achieve orgasm for women as an example.³⁷ Likewise, Hall has also emphasised Wright’s advice as unique from that of other experts at the time, her criticism of the fixation on penetrative sex and ‘feminist claims’ about the importance of clitoral orgasm, going further than other sex experts in her rejection of the ‘Freudian myth of the ‘vaginal orgasm’.’³⁸ Thus setting Wright apart from at the time conventional takes on sex and marriage through reference to her advice literature has been a

³⁵ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, ‘Obituary: Dr Helena Wright: Stalwart pioneer of birth control’, *The Times* (circa 1982).

³⁶ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, ‘Obituary: Helena Wright’, *People*, 9:2 (1982), p.42.

³⁷ Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford, 2006), pp.244; Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, p.209.

³⁸ Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp.154-155.

significant part of the construction of her role in the development of British sexual culture following her death.

Moderating the Mythology

Whilst obituaries and tributes to Wright mythologised her role within family planning, constructing her biographical life in light of her activism and work in this space, many accounts work to moderate Wright's impact in terms of her advice and approach to sex and marriage. This demonstrates that the resonance of interwar and immediate post-war advice culture was mediated in several ways. In the historiography, for example, Cook argued that although Wright's approach to clitoral masturbation was unique compared to other writers of the time, her belief that guilt could spontaneously occur in a woman who did this too often illustrated how she often failed to cast off socially constructed beliefs about women's sexual pleasure.³⁹ More recently, Erin Holliday-Karre concluded that the 'gains women reformers achieved, in terms of their engagement in heated debates regarding sex education, birth control, and the promotion of orgasm for women, were short-lived', in part because authors like Wright repeatedly reinforced the role of the penis in female pleasure by stressing vaginal orgasms as a sign of sexual maturity in women.⁴⁰ Even in the context of controversial beliefs for the time, Holliday-Karre has argued, feminist sex experts relied on male-focused understandings of sexual pleasure and consequently reinforced heterosexual power dynamics, making them less revolutionary ideologically than has often been suggested.⁴¹ Thus whilst some like Hall have

³⁹ Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, p.209.

⁴⁰ Erin Holliday-Karre, "'Dr. Freud Seemed To Think That I Was Quite A Famous Case': Sexual Discourse in 1920s Feminism and Fiction", *Women's Studies*, 45 (2016), pp.324, 329.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.326.

understood Wright's approach to clitoral orgasm as a 'startling and feminist claim' that went further than other authors at the time, in more recent work, the radical nature of these ideas has been nuanced.⁴²

Suggesting that the radical nature of Wright's advice has sometimes been overstated in testimonies to her life and work is the reception of *Sex and Society*, her purposefully controversial 'new code for sex', towards the latter half of her career. George Allen & Unwin's reader Peter A. Leek, reviewing Wright's *Sex and Society* in the late-1960s, characterised Wright as a 'kindly though unimaginative liberal moralist' whose 'new code' for sex was 'fine—yet adds nothing to the ideology of enlightened conventionalists.' *Sex and Society* appeared to be a 'failure' of a revolutionary take on sexual behaviour and relationships, according to Leek, suggesting Wright's radicalism in this context had been exhausted in her later years.⁴³ This was further emphasised in published reviews of her book, for instance, psychologist C. Ellison in *The British Journal of Psychiatry* wrote: '[...] these ideas appear not only controversial but frankly revolutionary, however in a limited way, it is possible to find people who have already not only accepted these ideas, but practise them successfully as well.'⁴⁴ Recognising this publication as neither entirely revolutionary nor conservative, these reviews complicate the image of Wright constructed in biographies and obituaries.

⁴² Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p.155.

⁴³ University of Reading Special Collections, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Papers, Reader's Reports (henceforth: AURR), AURR 29/5/20, Peter Leek on *The New Sexual Code* by Helena Wright (c. 1967).

⁴⁴ C. Ellison, 'Book Reviews: *Sex and Society* by Helena Wright', *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 115:522 (1969), p.623.

Articles written about Wright into the later stages of her life situate her ideas as less progressive than they might once have been. For instance, in 1978 an interview for Wright's ninety-first birthday in *Penthouse Forum* came with a lengthy disclaimer by the editor.⁴⁵ *Penthouse Forum* began in 1968 and contained a combination of articles on sex psychology, medicine, and health alongside 'erotically oriented letters-to-the-editor'.⁴⁶ As Dee L. McEntire has written, it was 'to give everyone a medium to learn more about [...] sex in the real world.'⁴⁷ The editor's disclaimer to the interview stated that 'people like Dr Wright are entitled to their opinions even when we don't agree with them', and went on to deconstruct some of the beliefs the 'sex expert' had expressed in her interview with journalist and former patient of hers, Suzanna Stone.⁴⁸ The editor questioned the connections made between 'promiscuity' and 'weakness of character'. They also disagreed with Wright's belief that the over-use of what she termed woman's 'sixth sense' (their sexual response achieved through clitoral stimulation) without the context of emotional intimacy and other sexual activity for 'the sake of sensation' was 'dangerous', resulting in a 'coarsening, deadening, and deteriorating effect on the personality'.⁴⁹ The disclaimer concluded: 'Despite this measure of disagreement [...] we'd also like to praise her courage in braving decades of criticism of her pioneering contribution [...].'⁵⁰ Gesturing towards Wright's beliefs as outdated and misaligned with the magazine's principles yet simultaneously acknowledging in a reverent manner her contributions to sexual medicine and discourses around sexual relationships, this profile again moderated her public image in her later years.

⁴⁵ Wellcome, PP/PRE/J.1/11, Suzanna Stone, 'Britain's Pioneer of Sensible Love: Tribute to Dr. Helena Wright', *Penthouse Forum* (undated, circa September/October 1978), pp.20-24.

⁴⁶ Dee L. McEntire, 'Erotic Storytelling: Sexual Experience and Fantasy Letters in Forum Magazine', *Western Folklore*, 51:1 (1992), p.91.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.92.

⁴⁸ Wellcome, PP/PRE/J.1/11, Suzanna Stone, 'Britain's Pioneer of Sensible Love', p.24.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp.22, 24.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.24.

Much of the secondary literature also mediates the real-life impact of Wright's family planning and clinical work on her patients in the earlier part of her career, and consequently on birth control practices more broadly. For example, whilst Fisher has recognised the importance of Wright's advice books in the context of a newly proliferating genre of published advice in the interwar period, she uses Wright's own testimony about her clinical practice to show that the introduction of appliance methods of birth control—like female contraceptive caps—was fraught and often unsuccessful. Wright stated that patients often did not return to her clinic once given instructions on appliance methods, whilst Fisher also argued that frequently, men had ultimate decision-making power in relationships over contraception, as most methods relied on their cooperation and female contraceptive caps, for instance, could be difficult for women to hide.⁵¹ Despite Hall's emphasis on the unique, controversial nature of Wright's beliefs and work, she also recognised the limitations of her practical advice to women. Referencing Wright's sequel to *Sex Factor*, printed in 1947, she included Wright's acceptance that her 'optimism' for the transformative power of reducing sexual ignorance was 'ill-founded', Hall stated that the many obstacles to reshaping women's sex lives were still largely intact by the post-war period, something Wright herself recognised.⁵²

Wright's contributions to family planning activism and organisations and the proliferation of advice literature across the twentieth century are undeniable. However, the ways in which her work was elevated, her radicalism foregrounded, and the revolutionary nature of her advice for women patients was emphasised in her birthday tributes and obituaries demonstrates a tendency

⁵¹ Fisher, *Birth Control*, pp.244, 129-132, 199.

⁵² Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, pp.154-155.

to mythologise Wright and her life as an explanatory tool for shifts in sexual culture in this period. Her life was thus written and rewritten in her final years and following her death, giving shape and meaning to the ways the family planning movement and advice culture more broadly evolved over the century. Despite it being possible to moderate the stories told about her life and work in this way, turning back to personal testimony in her archive, it is important to recognise the individual lives she became part of. Recollections of individual sexual lives transformed attested to the multiple meanings encounters with advice culture could hold, the impacts of which on a more personal level became obscured in the public sources that idealised Wright's life or critiqued her work and beliefs.

Advice Literature 'fan mail' and the Navigation of Formative Sexual Intimacies

In 1936, six years after the publication of *Sex Factor*, Wright received a letter from a young reader, EMC, seeking advice. After reading Wright's 'interesting' advice book she sought guidance on the conduct of her sexual relationship with her fiancé. Her letters, worth quoting at length here, expressed the gendered fears and tentative hopes that characterised her first encounters with sexual life just under a month before her eighteenth birthday. Although EMC noted in the following correspondence that she was almost nineteen, digitised genealogical records and the dating of her correspondence reveal that she was in fact not yet eighteen:

[...] I am a little worried I wondered if you might be so kind as to give me a little advice, but first of all I hope you will forgive my writing to you personally but you seem to be the only person who can help me. My problem is this, although I am engaged to a boy I

love very much and am nearly nineteen, my parents have never mentioned to me anything about Sex and Life [...].⁵³

EMC was anxious, as her interest in sex grew, that she did not know how ‘far’ she should be ‘allowed to go’ in her relationship before marriage because of her parent’s lack of willingness to discuss it. Tensions between ‘giving in’ to sex and ‘pull[ing] herself together’ sat awkwardly alongside her question of whether there was a way to ‘satisfy any desires temporarily’.⁵⁴ Although Wright’s response is not archived, EMC’s second letter reveals that Wright questioned whether she was sure she was in love, whether she had any religious affiliations which would be damaged if she pursued a sexual relationship, if her parents would be hurt by her actions, and what her fiancé thought of the prospect of taking their relationship further.⁵⁵

EMC wrote again, confiding in Wright with more details of her relationship. Characterising her fiancé—whom she had spoken with ‘in an open way’ about sex—she wanted to prove to Wright he was a good man, and her desire was not hasty or impulsive:

[...] he feels there is nothing wrong in it when the two people concerned are in love like ourselves, please don’t think Doctor he is trying to lead me on, its nothing like that, he is a perfectly decent fellow, and would not do anything against my wish. [...] I don’t say it boastingly, but he thinks a lot of me, and he has always been very sweet to me [...] but

⁵³ Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4, letter from EMC to Helena Wright (undated, circa 16 July 1936). This analysis draws upon records available on Ancestry.com: The National Archives (henceforth: TNA), General Register Office, United Kingdom, *Civil Registration Birth Index, 1918-2007*.

⁵⁴ Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4, letter from EMC to Helena Wright (undated, circa 16 July 1936).

⁵⁵ Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4, letter from EMC to Helena Wright (27 July 1936).

what is worrying me, if we do what I have asked you, will that make any difference to him, I mean will he after having got a certain amount of satisfaction, lose his interest or respect in me, he says it would make no difference in that way at all, and that it would bring us closer together.⁵⁶

Situating her desire for sex in the broader context of her relationship, we learn more of the latent pressures EMC felt to establish sexual intimacy with her fiancé. I argue that EMC's navigation of her tentative sexual experiences in writing drew from and depended on the advice she read to embed with meaning what was ostensibly a scenario causing considerable conflict and confusion. Reading between the lines, her letters also demonstrate how and where the wider discourses of advice culture beyond the specific books individuals read intersected with personal experience. Expanding on this, I consider the role of letter writing in navigating the personal as it came into contact with new ideas about sex, desires, and relationships.

EMC's letter drew explicitly on content from *Sex Factor*. Attempting to convince not only Wright but also herself of the stability and sincerity of her connection, she employed descriptors of decency, sweetness, and respectfulness to show she wanted to have sex for the *right* reasons: genuine love, the intention of marriage, and the possibility of deeper emotional intimacy. Supporting this was her assertion that her fiancé felt there was nothing 'wrong' with sexual acts in the context of love. This framing is reflective of Wright's conceptualisation of sexual desire as a 'natural characteristic of every normal adult woman and man', stating explicitly that there

⁵⁶ Ibid.

is nothing ‘wrong’ with the sex act.⁵⁷ She had argued that sexual intercourse was not merely for reproduction, but for mental and spiritual fulfilment too as an ‘expression of love’.⁵⁸

Wright’s labelling of sex as natural and normal was not new at her time of writing; this belief sat at the core of advice literature prior to *Sex Factor*’s publication too. In the most recognisable example of *Married Love*, sex was defined as a natural phenomenon through Stopes’s use of metaphors of the natural world—comparing sexual desire to tides and waves—which in turn normalised the marital sexual relationship to give it legitimacy.⁵⁹ As Laura Doan has argued, *Married Love* explicitly introduced the ‘natural as normal’, thus emphasising the importance of this discourse of normativity for developing ideas about the roles and morality of sexual relationships.⁶⁰ Thus, both EMC and Wright—and the broader discourse of marital advice at the time— placed sexual intimacy within a moral framework that relied on an ‘essentialist’ argument about ‘sex itself as a ‘natural urge’’, to quote Lesley Hall, to inform its legitimacy.⁶¹ However, whilst Wright and others were sanctioning sexual acts *within* marriage as morally acceptable in their published works, EMC was negotiating to extend this justification to sex between unmarried but engaged adults who had a genuine emotional connection. This demonstrates that engagement with advice literature was far from tacit acceptance of ideas about sex and relationships, but instead, it was a means through which readers like EMC

⁵⁷ Helena Wright, *The Sex Factor in Marriage: A book for those who are about to be married*, third edition (London, 1945), p.28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, pp.28-29.

⁵⁹ Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties*, eighteenth edition (London, 1926), p.150.

⁶⁰ Laura Doan, ‘Marie Stopes’s Wonderful Rhythm Charts: Normalizing the Natural’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 78:4 (2017), p.598.

⁶¹ Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*, pp.2-3.

attempted to negotiate and flex the boundaries of prescriptive notions of morality and respectability attached to sexual intimacy.

The trope of ‘giving in’ to sexual desire and/or pressures and the potential societal and relational consequences of this for EMC reveals the deeply classed and gendered nature of sexual interactions, anxieties over which were produced and reinforced in and through advice discourse in the interwar period. EMC’s concerns about sex—and Wright’s too suggested by her inferred reply—were not for the impact on her fiancé’s life and reputation beyond the relationship, but for her own; would she lose his respect? Would her parents be hurt? Would her religious affiliations be damaged? Ultimately, these questions came back to EMC, suggesting that sex had the potential to degrade her, even in the eyes of the person she would be intimate with. Thus the question and pressure of sex before marriage, for EMC, was culturally imbued with disruptive potential, the imagined consequences of which played out in her defensive justifications of her desire to Wright.

Longstanding notions of middle-class feminine respectability, chastity, and sexuality undoubtedly shaped EMC’s fears around ‘giving in’ to a premarital sexual relationship. For instance, Lucy Bland has argued that feminists at the turn of the twentieth century identified sex and sexuality for women as complex because it held the potential for both pleasure and danger.⁶² By the interwar period, as Stephen Brooke has shown, the ability to control sexuality and maintain feminine respectability was seen as a marker of middle-class morality that was constantly under threat, whilst working-class women’s sexuality was understood as unstable and largely uncontrolled. He argued that advice literature discourses confined acceptable sexual

⁶² Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality* (London, 2001), p.250.

relations to those within heterosexual marriage because of the disruptive potential held by promiscuous or unmanaged feminine sexuality and sexual behaviour.⁶³

Hannah Charnock's recent argument about teenage sexuality in late-twentieth-century advice culture is also worth quoting at length here as it gestures towards the ways in which younger girl's experiences differed from the conceptualisation of youthful sexuality in advice literature. She has proposed that sexual advice 'tended to present teenage sexual activity as a fraught negotiation between the impulses of the adolescent body and the emotional dynamics of heterosexual relationships' yet 'individuals located the significance of adolescent sexual activity in terms of their own sense of maturity and social status.'⁶⁴ In EMC's letter we see both her engagement with relational dynamics, sexual desires, and the negotiation of her adolescence in the context of the implied emotional maturity of herself and her fiancé. Wright's *Sex Factor* was not aimed at an adolescent audience, but EMC's engagement with it and her correspondence illustrate how she took on the concerns of 'sex experts' in attempting to understand her relational and sexual life. Alongside this—reflecting what Charnock has argued teenagers did later in the century—she located the significance of her sexual relationship as meaningful because of the emotional and erotic desires that she rendered mature through centring love and the potential for marital commitment. Moreover, her apparent decision to tell Wright she was 'nearly nineteen' instead of, as genealogical records suggest, a month away from being eighteen, could be read as an attempt to solidify her maturity as almost reaching adulthood. Read in this way, this correspondence is evidence of the ways in which adolescents

⁶³ Stephen Brooke, 'Bodies, Sexuality and the "Modernization" of the British Working Classes, 1920s to 1960s', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 69 (2006), pp.104-106.

⁶⁴ Hannah Charnock, "'How Far Should We Go?': Adolescent Sexual Activity and Understandings of the Sexual Life Cycle in Postwar Britain', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 32:3 (2023), p.248.

negotiated sexual relationships at a point when the sexual was located as more legitimate within marital relationships between adults.

EMC's ignorance was a further problem and a sticking point for the exploration of her sexuality that was to be overcome by negotiating access to information and education. Her reading of *Sex Factor* was prompted by the difficulties and pressures she was facing in her relationship, coupled with the ignorance she suggested was the fault of her parents. Her letters highlight how ignorance was the source of considerable anxiety and uncertainty. She framed sexual knowledge as a tool that would allow her to make decisions about *acting* on her sexual desire, which was what she worried could damage her identity. Using oral histories, Kate Fisher has argued that ignorance was widespread, especially amongst women, but that beyond being a term explaining 'a quantifiable level of understanding', it was a 'state of mind', that served a social function, making up an important part of many women's identities in particular: 'ignorance implied moral purity, innocence and respectability.'⁶⁵ Sigel has more recently noted how expressions of ignorance in letters to Stopes were not coy or something to accept, but rather, 'self-education' using Stopes as a 'model for self-improvement' was an appropriate, active response to the hindrances of ignorance that tangibly harmed reader's lives.⁶⁶ The tension between the discomfort of ignorance and the need to preserve an air of respectability is evident in EMC's correspondence; whilst she recognised the social consequences of seeking sexual knowledge and intimacy, her defensive justifications of her feelings illuminate the tensions

⁶⁵ Fisher, *Birth Control*, pp.26-27. See also Kate Fisher 'Modern Ignorance' in Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming and Lauren Kassell, (eds), *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 2018), pp.471-484.

⁶⁶ Sigel, *Making Modern Love*, p.52.

characterising her evolving relationship with sex. EMC's letters thus reflect this self-conscious approach to sexuality, affirming the role of ignorance in building a culture of advice-seeking.

EMC's letters consequently illustrate the function of, and work done by, letter writing and sexual story-telling to sex experts in the process of negotiating personal sexual experiences and forming understandings of the sexual self. In her correspondence, the 'sex expert' was deferred to as the moral authority on appropriate sexual behaviour. Sigel's analysis of the Stopes correspondence demonstrates similarities with this, for instance, she picks out how both male and female readers grounded their pleas for advice in their fundamental ignorance of sex and looked to Stopes as 'an arbiter of appropriate behaviour' who writers wanted intervention from.⁶⁷ The fact that EMC felt compelled to contact Wright for advice, and present such a detailed account of her relationship and justifications for her desires, highlights the ways in which the reading process could open space for deeper engagement with sexuality on an individual level. It also shows how writing to a 'sex expert' was a way to meaningfully navigate sexual problems or dilemmas by externalising the internal anxieties that a reader felt; for EMC, *Sex Factor* provided a gateway to express desires and fears simultaneously. As Sigel has argued, 'Reading provided the necessary background to articulate themselves as sexual subjects by providing style sheets for writing.'⁶⁸ EMC's letters reflect her reading practice, showing how her encounters with advice literature shaped her ability to name and express her sexual desires and problems.

⁶⁷ Ibid, pp.51-53.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.18.

Reading and an initial written encounter with Wright therefore created a ‘confessional’ space where EMC felt able to confide in Wright and express desires that she otherwise found unspeakable in the context of sexual ignorance and her parents’ lack of willingness to discuss sex. Cohen has conceptualised a British ‘confessional culture’ evolving around the tendency towards sexual silence: the construction of confessional spaces, she argued, was inevitable in a ‘country where [...] Englishmen when sober do not ‘give themselves away’.’⁶⁹ The evolution of ‘mass-market confession’ through ‘agony aunt’ pages and other such spaces from the 1890s exploded in the 1930s, thus understanding the sex expert’s letterbox as a confessional space is productive for explaining why young women like EMC wrote in the expressive, intimate ways that they did.⁷⁰ I have proposed throughout this thesis that sexual advice discourse was much more pervasive and accessible in the public realm than has previously been recognised. However, the argument that discussion of individual sexual experience and sexuality was a producer of widespread sexual ignorance that necessitated and provoked the formation of a confessional culture is evidenced through EMC’s lack of discussion of sex with her parents in the private realm, leading her to seek advice from publications and letter writing.

In this context, it is tempting to understand confiding in a ‘sex expert’ or the process of sexual confession as liberating and educating. However, EMC’s defensive, justifying tone throughout her letter reveals the expectation of a fraught interaction where her desires and proposed actions were subject to judgement. Within his critique of the ‘repression hypothesis’, Michel Foucault argued that confession—originating from the Catholic Sacrament of Penance—embedded the process of speaking about sex to authority with a sense of obligation. Deconstructing and

⁶⁹ Cohen, *Family Secrets*, p.xii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.181.

probing sexual desires and behaviours for their effects and meanings proliferated discourses around sex, allowing for it to be named and controlled.⁷¹ Developing this, Cohen has argued that ‘the drive to confess one’s transgressions’ grew in the interwar years where definitions of sexual normality and notions of respectable sexual behaviour grew increasingly narrow.⁷² Moreover, Margaretta Jolly has argued that letters reveal how fraught and ‘troubling the desire for intimacy’ could be.⁷³ The tensions permeating EMC’s letter—of being subject to Wright’s judgement, of damaging her relationships and social position—centre on the disruptive potential of intimacy.

Although it is unclear whether EMC knew much about Wright’s approach to sexual intimacy beyond the heteronormative, nuclear family model of sex that *Sex Factor* presented, the sex expert was known for being more lenient in her approach to intimacy outside of marriage. She believed that complete sexual fidelity was ‘unreasonable to expect and impossible for most people to achieve’, to quote Evans, and sex beyond the marital bed was enriching.⁷⁴ According to her obituaries, she was one of the first doctors to advise young, unmarried people on contraception.⁷⁵ It is possible that EMC felt able to confide in Wright *because* she knew of her approach to sex, however, her deliberation suggested that her predominant or only encounter with Wright’s ideas was through *Sex Factor*. Her lengthy explanations of her relationship, fiancé, and reasoning for wanting to express her sexual desires reveal her expectation of rejection or judgement from Wright. Viewing EMC’s desire and intention for sex before

⁷¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, pp.17-21.

⁷² Cohen, *Family Secrets*, p.209.

⁷³ Jolly, *In Love and Struggle*, p.1.

⁷⁴ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, Barbara Evans, ‘Obituary: Helena Wright MB BS’, *Women in Medicine*, 1:3 (Winter, 1982), p.20.

⁷⁵ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, ‘Obituary: Helena Wright, *People*, 9:2 (1982), p.42.

marriage as beyond the respectable in the context of interwar advice that privileged the marital relationship as the only sanctioned site for sexual behaviour, her letters read as an anxious confession of transgression. This further illustrates the layered ways in which confession in letters to sex experts could operate for readers, not only as an affirming mode of navigating formative encounters with the sexual, but as a potentially fraught space to verbalise, justify, and ask for acceptance for desires that felt emotionally and culturally challenging.

While EMC's presence in Wright's archive stopped before the event of her marriage, it is imaginable that her correspondence with the 'sex expert' had an impact on her married life and sexual relationships beyond the paper trail. Following EMC's story through genealogical records, we can see that at age twenty-one in 1939 she was working as a receptionist, the same year in which she got married, presumably to the man she wrote about. Living with her husband's family—his father a 'Motor Trader', his mother did not work, and one of his sisters was a 'Teacher of Domestic Services'—her life reads as on the boundary of working-class and middle-class.⁷⁶ There are only thin details to go on here, but nevertheless, there is a sense that her relationship continued at least for a while, even if it is unclear whether her correspondence with Wright impacted her decision-making regarding her sexual relationship before marriage.

Locating EMC in the genealogical records is important for understanding the significance of this correspondence in the broader context of her life. Julia Laite's reflective work on the uses and ethics of this type of research is extremely pertinent here. As she has argued, the ability to trace a private individual through digital records in particular can be transformative for 'small'

⁷⁶ Ancestry.com, TNA, *1939 England and Wales Register*.

histories that speak to bigger trends and phenomena.⁷⁷ In this case, it has allowed me to combine limited evidence of EMC's life available in genealogical records that lack her voice with the detailed, rich context of her letters that demonstrate her agency, enabling a deeper commentary on her experiences of sexual and relational life as a woman, an adolescent, and someone who was actively engaging with advice literature.⁷⁸ In doing so, to quote Laite, EMC becomes a 'real person, with all of the complications, contradictions, and idiosyncrasies human beings bring', rather than an anonymised correspondent of a 'sex expert' alone.⁷⁹ However, I simultaneously walk a difficult boundary between preserving an individual's privacy and revealing enough of their life to unveil the less obvious meaning embedded in her correspondence. As Laite has also argued, there is an uncomfortable tension between this work as giving voice and agency to historical subjects, and the condescending exercise of 'commodifying individual life' to tell bigger stories about the past.⁸⁰ There are no easy answers to how to negotiate this as a historian, however, it is important to tread carefully by maintaining privacy where possible, remembering the assumptions made about EMC's life from these sources can only ultimately tell part of her story, and reflecting on the discomfort that comes with easily accessible genealogical records when attempting to understand historical subjects as people with agency, rather than simply evidence for writing histories.

⁷⁷ Julia Laite, 'The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age', *Journal of Social History*, 53:4 (2020), p.964.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.972.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.974.

⁸⁰ Ibid, pp.977-978.

Complaint

The complaint letter was a form of engagement with marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice that has not been fully acknowledged in the existing literature. There are two examples in the Wright archive that speak to this theme. One very short letter from Robert Patton Ranken Lyle—a medical doctor specialising in gynaecology and midwifery—in 1929 consisted of a complaint about some information on birth control apparently received from Wright:

As I regard Birth Control as another name for the indiscriminate propaganda of sexual vice—the most detestable of all crimes—I should be glad if you would refrain from sending me any further information.⁸¹

Although brief, this letter displays its authors' consuming emotions about contraceptive information as a form of 'sexual vice'. Moralistic language and the likening of birth control information to propaganda in negative terms highlights the feelings that motivated this letter. Of more interest here, however, is the second complaint letter from a man whose wife had been a patient of Wright. In 1930, OE wrote a complaint with a similar emotional charge, but with more specific accusations towards Wright that located her as the architect of a marital breakdown:

[...] you are slowly but surely separating a man & wife & robbing two fine little boys of the sight of their father they adore me & I am sure it will harm them when I am gone

⁸¹ Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.2, letter from Robert Patton Ranken Lyle to Helena Wright (October 1929). For a biography of Robert Patton Ranken Lyle, see M.K., 'Obituary: R.P. Ranken Lyle, M.D., DCh., F.R.C.O.G.', *British Medical Journal*, 1 (1950), p.379.

because they adore me far better than they do their mother. For a Lady to tell any Wife that she can do such a thing in her married life & all through life & that the husband has no choice in the matter at all I never thought that there was a Christian alive like it Won't you write me & say you never said this & my Wife will never see you again I feel sure. Yours very Broken Hearted, [OE]. PS It will take years for me to think of my wife in the old usual way again.⁸²

The hurt and distress felt by OE over his sexual and marital relationship permeated his correspondence, and his feelings of powerlessness in the situation are indicated by his reference to the lack of choice he had as a husband. Ultimately, he indicated their marriage was at breaking point because of Wright's advice; he would be leaving, his sons 'robbed' of their father, and his wife prevented from seeing the doctor again, and begs for a reply from her to help fix the marriage. It is unclear whether the correspondent's wife was a patient of Wright or a reader of her books, but nevertheless, this letter represents a direct engagement with the ideas and effects of advice culture on an individual relationship.

Reading between the lines, there are two possible types of advice Wright could have given this correspondent's wife that had a disruptive effect on their marriage. One option is that the wife was advised to maintain intimate sexual relationships outside of her marriage. As her biographer Evans noted, Wright had often advocated the benefits of extramarital sexual relationships at her clinic and in her writing—it is possible that this is what she encouraged OE's wife to do.⁸³ Alternatively, OE's wife may have received contraceptive advice. This is more likely, both

⁸² Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.2, letter from OE to Helena Wright (24 July 1930). Emphasis and punctuation original.

⁸³ For example, see Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, pp.159, 173.

within the context of Wright's running of a family planning clinic, and because of her ethos that women should always have a choice about their contraceptive practices: she maintained that 'It is the individual you must reach [...] Give women the choice and they will choose [...] I want to see every individual on earth having that choice, and having it free.'⁸⁴ OE's contention that his wife had been advised he could have 'no choice in the matter at all', and the implication that this advice would contradict Christian marital values, can be read to support this interpretation.⁸⁵ Kate Fisher, briefly including this letter in her chapter on male power and contraceptive decision-making, supports this interpretation, reading it as 'an irate man whose wife had failed to prevent him finding out she had a cap [...].'⁸⁶

This correspondence locates letters as a space of emotional release where the author engaged in a conciliatory exercise of self-help. OE's letter writing was not conversational foremost; it was an expressive way of advocating for himself in his relationship at a point where he felt disrespected and powerless. Leonie Hannan, discussing women's friendships and letter writing in early-modern England, theorised that the act of writing was not only an opportunity for emotional expression and comfort but 'a form for [her] incisive self-advocacy.'⁸⁷ Hannan's analysis can be applied to this context to understand why this author felt compelled to write when he could not expect a response, though he hoped for one. As some wrote to sex experts to navigate desire and reckon with unfamiliar or uncomfortable sexual feelings, others wrote to express the disrupting effect of the sexual on their emotional and physical world, whether that

⁸⁴ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.7, 'Obituary: Helena Wright', *People*, 9:2 (1982), p.42.

⁸⁵ Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.2, letter from OE to Helena Wright (24 July 1930).

⁸⁶ Fisher, *Birth Control*, p.199.

⁸⁷ Hannan, *Women of Letters*, p.168.

was because of reading information they fundamentally disagreed with, or the consequences of newfound sexual expression on a relationship.

In OE's case, disruptive sexuality was causing a crisis of masculinity. Wright's advice presented a threat to the gendered marital relationship and the nuclear patriarchal family structure. Writing in his early-thirties, OE was a middle-class 'Engineer' living in a wealthy area; being the head of his household, he was clearly uncomfortable with the changing sexual dynamic he saw resulting from Wright's advice.⁸⁸ As Laura King has argued, in popular cultural conceptualisations of marriage and men's domestic roles as perpetuated in commercial products such as romance novels, affective relationships 'incorporated a hierarchy between men and women'.⁸⁹ Although a more balanced, companionate marriage was often the ideal in advice literature, other popular imaginings of emotional and intimate relationships privileged 'normative masculinity' which combined authority and care in a perceptively 'traditional' family setting.⁹⁰ OE's experience of the changes in his marital relationships brought about by engagements with advice culture and contraception in particular were fraught, perhaps in part because they sat in tension with ideals of patriarchal marriage and masculinity in sexual relationships saturating popular culture.

In this wider context, letter writing in the mid-twentieth century for men was often a space for expressing heterosexual masculinity, as Alison Twells has shown through her analysis of

⁸⁸ Ancestry.com, City of Westminster Archives Centre, *Church of England Marriage and Banns, 1755-1835*.

⁸⁹ Laura King, 'The Perfect Man: Fatherhood, Masculinity and Romance in Popular Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain' in Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones, (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970* (Basingstoke, 2015), p.41.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

servicemen's romantically and sexually charged letters to women and girls during the Second World War.⁹¹ Twells reveals active, controlling masculinity present in letter writing, yet conversely, OE's letter exposes the fragility of masculine sexual expression, and the fraught relationship men navigated between their sexual relationships and expectations as a married man. As Hall has illustrated in her analysis of men's letters to Stopes, sexual discourses emerging from advice literature could be deeply problematic and ambiguous for men, contrary to assumptions that they operated almost exclusively to his benefit, as this letter illustrates.⁹² Additionally, there are multiple examples of complaints like this in the Stopes archive, for instance, two from men rejecting Stopes's advocacy of birth control are included in Ruth Hall's edited collection.⁹³ OE's letter thus represents an expression of desperation to reassert his compromised masculinity and masculine sexuality at a point when it was dangerously close to being completely undermined. This supports Roper's claim that letter writing functioned as an 'attempt to work upon and transform the psychic reality', as he wrote explicitly to Wright not expecting a reply but hoping to manage his emotional response and change the outcome for his relationship.⁹⁴

Whilst letters were a vessel for a range of emotion, the nature of the complaint, and what compelled the authors to engage in this exercise, is worth exploring. Complaint letter writing in the context of advice literature was a psychological exercise intended to rid the internal self of emotional conflict when presented with sexual knowledges that were frequently disruptive for relationships and understandings of the self. Chelsea Saxby's work on complaints about

⁹¹ Alison Twells, 'Sex, Gender and Romantic Intimacy in Servicemen's Letters During the Second World War', *The Historical Journal*, 63:3 (2020), pp.732-753.

⁹² Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*, p.1.

⁹³ Hall, *Dear Dr Stopes*, pp.13, 176.

⁹⁴ Roper, 'Splitting in Unsent Letters', p.321.

‘dirty jokes’ on 1970s television offers a window onto how we can understand the emotional charge of anger, distress, sadness, or shock that compelled some to send complaint letters. Tracing ‘a private feeling of embarrassment caused by a dirty joke intruding into the family living room; to the recounting of disgust when ‘going public’ with a formal complaint’, Saxby opens up possibilities for understanding written complaint as a genre of letter writing in itself, showing how the internal emotions became externalised through the process of putting pen to paper.⁹⁵ Complaint letters have not often been focused on in histories of advice literature, for instance, Hall dismissed the ‘very little’ negative correspondence Stopes received.⁹⁶ However, OE’s letter in particular reveals the emotionally intensive nature of encounters with advice culture, and highlights the mixed and nuanced emotional responses and relational impacts that emerging public discourses about sex could elicit.

Men’s Letter Writing and Critiquing Expert Knowledge

Men’s engagements with advice literature in letters to sex experts sometimes also extended into reformulating and attempting to build on knowledge from the texts, exposing the unstable boundary between ‘lay’ and ‘expert’ knowledge production. In 1958, FH began an exchange with Wright based on his reading of *Sex Factor* which he had purchased in 1939, and *Sex Fulfilment in Married Women* (1947), purchased in 1948.⁹⁷ Almost twenty years after first encountering these books, and prompted by the ‘curious effect’ parts of the latter book had on him, he offered his opinions to Wright, which are worth quoting at length here:

⁹⁵ Saxby, ‘Making Love on British Telly’, p.43.

⁹⁶ Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*, p.10.

⁹⁷ The correspondence set drawn on here is held in Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4. Wright, *Sex Factor*; Helena Wright, *Sex Fulfilment in Married Women* (London, 1947).

I sensed that somewhere hidden in its text was the answer to the recurring question of man-wife adaptation which is the theme of that chapter. It was something like seeing a ghost; it was there if only I could make it materialise. In the end, after many re-readings, the ghost materialised out of the following words on page 34; “Anyone acquainted with the laws of heredity will find it hard to believe that the FEW CENTURIES OF CULTURAL HUMAN LIFE should have been sufficient to deprive 50% of all women of a faculty with which they were originally endowed”. Here was the needed clue; the answer was to be found not in the recent, but in the remote, past. So into the past I searched, and to my great joy there I found the solution, and I have written it in “The Origin of Congenital Frigidity In Women” running to about 8,000 words.⁹⁸

FH went on to express his desire for his typescript to be published, requesting Wright’s ‘critical opinion’ on it first, acknowledging the ‘imaginative work’ that she had done to inspire his own writing.⁹⁹ Wright tentatively accepted the task, and the results were disparaging for FH, her criticisms ending bluntly:

There, that is all I can say. If I have discouraged you from trying to publish, some good will have been done. If anything I have written is really responsible, I am appalled, but helpless, and I don’t know what you can do if this typescript represents how your mind works.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4, letter from FH to Helena Wright (24 March 1958). Emphasis original.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4, letter from Helena Wright to FH (23 June 1958).

FH's correspondence reflected a sustained effort to engage with the specifics of advice in Wright's books in a manner that was assertive and provoked a considerable reaction from the sex expert. Through his letter writing and production of a typescript, FH sought to insert himself into the community of sexual expertise, placing value on his own ability as a reader to dissect, reformulate, and communicate his perceived knowledge. Referring to Wright's prowess in the context of medical and scientific sexual knowledge to elicit a response, whilst simultaneously positioning himself as an intellectual equal to Wright, this exchange illustrates the specific ways in which some readers—in this case, men—sought to actively participate in the production of sexual knowledges through their encounters with advice culture.

Despite there being other examples in the Wright archive of critical engagements with Wright's books, this is the only extensive correspondence from a male reader who did not have any formal medical or scientific training and did not know Wright personally, and the only instance of an attempt to respond to Wright's work via writing a sexological text. If other correspondence of this nature from men or women was ever received by Wright, it does not appear to have been archived.¹⁰¹ FH was in his seventies when he corresponded with Wright. He had been married

¹⁰¹ FH's correspondence is one of two sets from men critically engaging with Wright's books at length in PP/HRW/B.4. A second letter from 'sex expert' Arthur Herbert Gray in 1929 offered opinions on *Sex Factor* after both he and his wife had read it. They thought it was 'extraordinarily well done' and his critique included suggested expansions of some sections he thought were 'too short to be properly appreciated' and the elucidation of the religious framing of the role of sex in Christian life: Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4 letter from AHG to Helena Wright (18 September 1929). A third, incomplete set of correspondence came from Dublin-born artist William John Leech, who knew Wright personally, and wrote about painting, religion and female beauty following an unarchived letter asking Wright a question; it is unclear whether this exchange was prompted by any of Wright's published work: Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4 letter from WJL to Helena Wright (undated). Beyond this file, another two letters with comments Wright's book *What is Sex?: An Outline for Young People* (published 1932) came from schoolteachers asked to review the manuscript: Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.5.

and worked in a draper's shop as a 'Master Draper'.¹⁰² FH's response here is therefore interesting for its uniqueness. It does not quite match the patterns of complaint letters discussed earlier, yet it demonstrates another alternative possibility opened in some reader's minds to engage in sexological discourses in ways that stepped beyond advice-seeking. In the absence of the full typescript he produced, then, it is necessary to read between the lines to examine the ways in which FH engaged directly with Wright's advice texts and wider understandings of sex, sexuality, and bodies that were proliferating as popular discourses by the 1950s.

FH's letter and Wright's responses indicate that the author had a relatively broad—if, according to Wright, often incorrect or misguided—repertoire of knowledge about sexual relationships and sexological discourses at the time of writing. For example, in one instance he referred to 'man-wife adaptation', a common theme in advice literature at the time related to notions of how innate sexual desires in men and women functioned. In the chapter FH referenced, Wright provided a historical survey of understandings of sexual life with attention to the perceived differences in sexual experiences and desires of men and women.¹⁰³ She noted that 'male-female sexual adaptation' had consistently been a 'problem' in sexual relationships across the whole history of mankind.¹⁰⁴ It was broadly understood that men had an innately rampant sexual desire requiring control, whilst women had a responsive sexual desire that required activating through the efforts of their partner. For instance, in his 1922 Christian advice manual, Arthur Herbert Gray conceptualised women's desire as 'dormant' until 'stirred into life' by her male lover, representing a sexual problem for men whose desire was uninhibited.¹⁰⁵ As Hall has

¹⁰² Ancestry.com, TNA, *1939 Register*.

¹⁰³ Wright, *Sex Fulfilment*, pp.21-41.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.41.

¹⁰⁵ See Arthur Herbert Gray, *Men, Women and God: A discussion of sex questions from the Christian point of view* (New York, 1922), pp.144-149.

written, a reliance on this ‘essentialist’ argument for sexual desire as innate and fundamentally different in men and women was commonplace.¹⁰⁶ Drawing on these pervasive conceptualisations of differential male and female sexual desire, FH perceived inadequacies in Wright’s works that he identified through the simile of ghosts. He believed a full understanding of the question of how men and their wives could adapt to one another was absent, thus he was inspired to investigate the concept further.

The title of FH’s typescript (‘The Origin of Congenital Frigidity’) further highlights his reiteration of concepts drawn from discourses about female sexual desire and scientific theories of human evolution. FH understood the phenomenon of sexual ‘frigidity’—female sexual coldness—as ‘congenital’, or, as Wright’s feedback indicates, ‘the product of Darwinian variation’.¹⁰⁷ It appears that his typescript sought to find the solutions to sexually unfulfilling marital relationships through deconstructing women’s sexual disinterest as the central problem, something he labelled as genetic or hereditary. Women appeared as a sexual ‘problem’ throughout advice texts and wider discourses around female ‘frigidity’ in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The presence of sexual desire was often perceived as dangerous and associated with prostitution.¹⁰⁸ By the 1920s, the notion of women’s inherent sexual disinterest was being rejected in advice literature; for instance, Gray wrote that ‘the delusion is nearly dead that woman is a passionless creature, who will never actively desire her husband [...]’.¹⁰⁹ In step with this dominant discourse, Wright’s feedback on the typescript outright rejected FH’s use of frigidity, calling the link he made between evolutionary theory and

¹⁰⁶ Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*, pp.2-3.

¹⁰⁷ Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4, letter from Helena Wright to FH (23 June 1958).

¹⁰⁸ Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp.48-91; Peter Cryle and Alison Moore, *Frigidity: An Intellectual History* (Basingstoke, 2011), pp.1-22.

¹⁰⁹ Gray, *Men, Women and God*, p.145.

repressed female sexual desire ‘misleading, and unjustifiable’ and rendering his argument ‘rubbish’.¹¹⁰ According to Peter Cryle and Alison Moore who have charted the pseudoscientific origins of frigidity, the concept was largely rejected by the end of the Second World War, especially by feminist thinkers, an argument supported by Wright’s response to FH. However, Cryle and Moore also noted that this did not mean the concept became extinct; it still ‘played significant roles in gender politics’, as illustrated by this one reader’s reliance on the terminology to name the difficulties with marital sexual relationships.¹¹¹ Thus whilst FH was adapting concepts from discourses on female sexuality, his interpretation was out of step with the emerging discourses on the functioning of female sexual desire in particular that characterised interwar and post-war marital guidance.

Wright repeatedly criticised FH’s understanding of evolutionary science as well, noting that he did not understand the term ‘mutation’, had confused the words ‘sexual’ and ‘reproduction’, and used anecdotes about seals, monkeys, and ‘primitive life’ in a nonsensical manner.¹¹² Whilst we do not have the full context of this criticism, reading between the lines, we can see how FH’s attempt to integrate scientific language resulted in confusing interpretations that did not align with the understandings of perceived authoritative experts. As Katy Price has argued in her work on public engagement with Albert Einstein’s theories, when scientific thought came into contact with broader audiences, ‘scientific ideas or language may be exploited as a rich and flexible cultural resource, resulting in multiple meanings that vary with audience and outlet.’¹¹³ FH’s integration of the language of evolution and genetics illustrates this; he interpreted the

¹¹⁰ Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4, letter from Helena Wright to FH (23 June 1958).

¹¹¹ Cryle and Moore, *Frigidity*, p.248.

¹¹² Wellcome, PP/HRW/B.4, letter from Helena Wright to FH (23 June 1958).

¹¹³ Price, *Loving Faster Than Light*, p.3.

ideas he had come into contact with to give weight to his own theories about women's sexual desire. These letters therefore highlight a detailed, serious engagement with the content of advice books distinct from the use of advice literature to explicitly navigate personal sexual encounters and problems.

Wright's response is also of interest for its illustration of how contentious the process of forming, asserting, and defending expertise on sex could be. The angry, frustrated, and defensive tone she took attempted to prevent FH from producing his typescript as a publication. This cutting response was characteristic for Wright. As her former secretary noted, she could 'flatten with a few well-chosen words'.¹¹⁴ Moreover, as Matthew Wale has argued in relation to nineteenth century natural history periodicals, those who fashioned themselves as gatekeepers of scientific knowledge saw correspondence from readers from indiscriminate backgrounds as a threat to their authority.¹¹⁵ Those who publicly claimed scientific expertise to write on sex frequently encountered backlash over their authority to speak on such subjects too. For example, as Alexander Geppert has written, the medical profession's reaction to Stopes claiming medical credentials to legitimise the publication of *Married Love* was unwelcoming, with numerous hostile attempts to label her work as harmful, inappropriate, or incorrect.¹¹⁶ The boundaries of what constituted sexual knowledge, and who could produce it, were therefore frequently contested. FH's exchange with Wright is emblematic of this, showing how the line between 'lay' and 'expert' knowledge was often blurry and constructed through gatekeeping,

¹¹⁴ Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, p.252.

¹¹⁵ Wale, *Making Entomologists*, pp.3-18.

¹¹⁶ Alexander Geppert, 'Divine Sex, Happy Marriage, Regenerated Nation: Marie Stopes's Marital Manual *Married Love* and the Making of a Best-Seller, 1918-1955', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8:3 (1998), pp.411-412.

leaving space for tensions between different actors who saw themselves as producers of sexual knowledges.

‘To no one but yourself would I make such a statement’: Reflective Sexual Story-telling in Letters to Helena Wright

Amongst the birthday letters Wright received across 1977 and 1978, several former patients detailed the impacts her advice at her clinics had on their lives, both relational and sexual, and more broadly. In these, the authors mapped out a biographical story of their sexual pasts and presents, using letter writing as a space to implicitly identify and narrate the ways in which advice culture shaped their sexual selves. Taking space to reflect on the advice and family planning services provided by Wright almost four decades previously, JOC wrote from London following hearing her on the radio:

Please will you accept my best wishes on your 90th birthday [...] & my appreciative thanks for the simple instructions and re-assuring [sic] advice you gave me way back in 1945 when I was living, much to my parents apprehension & disapproval, with the man who became my husband. My children were planned & remain a constant delight & joy to me.¹¹⁷

This former patient acknowledged her gratitude towards Wright for the support she had offered during a difficult time, when she felt looked down upon by her family for her relationship. The positive impact of family planning advice resonated with JOC for a long time after she had

¹¹⁷ PP/HRW/A.5, letter from JOC to Helena Wright (17 September 1977).

received it. Similarly, in an unsigned letter (also referenced earlier) from Gloucestershire recounted Wright's hospitality at her Weymouth Street clinic: 'I was a very early patient of yours [...]. You were very kind, & you gave me tea! Since then I visited you regularly [...].'¹¹⁸ Whilst this correspondent was sure Wright would not remember her, she wrote that at the age of seventy, she expected 'thousands of people seeing your face are inspired like myself.'¹¹⁹ Wright's advice endured in the memories of her former patients, so much so that they were compelled to contact her expressing their gratitude many decades later.

Whilst these letters are quite brief, some correspondents went into more depth about their lives, narrating a story where Wright was a central character. ECS, who described herself as a 'very grateful patient' from the 'early' years of Wright's family planning career (1939 to 1963), laid out the dual impact Wright's advice and clinic had on her life. Inspired by Wright, she had found herself involved in running and promoting a family planning clinic in Poole in the early-1970s, to the dismay of the anti-family planning local authorities, where they had around four- or five-hundred regular patients by the time of her letter.¹²⁰ ECS was not alone in her sourcing of career motivations from Wright's work, for instance, another correspondent who became a doctor thanked Wright, for she owed a lot to 'pioneer women doctors'.¹²¹ These letters resonate with the obituaries and biographies of Wright's life that foreground her family planning activism and position her as a significant historical actor in organising and shaping the direction of the movement. On an individual scale too, then, Wright's work in this area proved life changing for ECS in that it integrated her too into family planning service provision on a local level.

¹¹⁸ PP/HRW/A.5, anonymous letter to Wright (11th September 1977).

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.5, letter from ECS to Helena Wright (20 September 1977).

¹²¹ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.5, letter from UMK to Helena Wright (2 February 1978).

ECS also detailed the long-term effects Wright's advice had on her relationship and marital sex life beyond the confines of the clinic between 1939 and the early-1960s. She wrote of the sexual relationship she had sustained with her husband:

To my surprise and pleasure my husband and I in our sixties still enjoy intermittent intercourse, I never imagined that this would still be so at our age. To no one but yourself would I make such a statement, but your straight forward [sic] speaking and approach in these matters was one of the things I most appreciated when I came to you as a patient. [...] Once again I do send you my very best wishes and my very grateful thanks for all you did for me in the years gone by.¹²²

ECS credited Wright with the sexual satisfaction she continued to experience into her sixties. Here, the letter again functioned as a confessional space where the author could admit details of her private sexual life to Wright that she recognised she would refrain from discussing elsewhere. Charlotte Greenhalgh's argument that 'histories of love and marriage have been left to the young' is pertinent here.¹²³ The emotional charge and intimacy of the sexual and marital relationship later in life is extremely present in ECS's letter, yet the echoes of advice culture and the ways in which those receptive to it continued to internalise and feel the impacts of advice into the later stages of their lives has been marginalised in favour of discussions of youthful sexuality and intimacies throughout the rest of the lifecycle.¹²⁴

¹²² Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.5, letter from ECS to Helena Wright (20 September 1977).

¹²³ Charlotte Greenhalgh, 'Love in Later Life: Old Age, Marriage and Social Research in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain' in Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones, (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp.146-147.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Alternatively, another letter-writer, DN—who had seen a television interview of Wright in 1978—confessed to the unhappiness she was experiencing in her second marriage, expressing how isolated she felt: ‘I don’t know how to cope [...]. My husband would never consent to talking things over with anyone, but I thought that perhaps I could get some help to come to terms with the situation.’¹²⁵ The emotional outpouring taking place in this letter is made even more poignant by what appears to be watermarks, perhaps from tears, on the page smudging the writing. Whilst not a former patient or reader of Wright, DN’s letter is an example of how the space created by sex experts for the navigation of sexual and relationship problems was not contained to the interwar and immediate post-war periods.

Recalling Cohen’s argument that in a culture of silence and restraint around sex, a confessional culture formed of which letter writing was part, ECS and DN’s letters allowed them to indulge in a conversation about sex that felt otherwise secretive or unspeakable.¹²⁶ Complicating Cohen’s argument, though, the very public celebrations of Wright’s life and work around her ninetieth birthday on radio and television provided a route for expanding this conversation about private sexual lives. This plays into Foucault’s argument that public discourses about sex engendered new forms of control and regulation around the discussion of sex.¹²⁷ In this case, speaking about Wright’s contributions to cultural sexual life in general terms was acceptable in a public context, but when it came to private intimacies, this correspondent still felt a level of secrecy had to be maintained. Thus the letter as a confessional space was important to ECS and DN in different ways to express their sexual and relational experiences. DN’s letter in particular

¹²⁵ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.5, letter from DN to Helena Wright (3 February 1978).

¹²⁶ Cohen, *Family Secrets*, pp.xii, 181.

¹²⁷ Foucault, *History of Sexuality* Vol. 1, pp.17-21.

highlights how even for women encountering advice culture much later in life, the sex expert could still be a confessional space for the navigation of the difficulties experienced in their intimate relationships.

Through this, the enduring impact of the ‘sex expert’ as a source of advice, comfort, and reassurance that extended considerably beyond the boundaries of the patient-doctor or audience relationship is visible. Evans wrote in her biography that Wright was able to forge an intimate and trusting relationship with her patients as women with mutual, gender-based experiences, something Wright herself also believed.¹²⁸ In these letters, we therefore see how these relationships retained meaning in former patient’s later lives even though it appears they had not psychically been seen by the doctor for many years. In writing about their bodies and sexual experiences in correspondence, Wright’s former patients therefore recalled and attempted to maintain their connection and emotional intimacy with the doctor across time and distance. As Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllynne Haggerty and Karen Harvey have argued, ‘letters stood in for their authors [...] Motivated by the very absence of the body, letters nonetheless brought people together, often by bringing the body to the fore.’¹²⁹ This shows the sustained meaning that Wright and her advice had to them, and the significance of letter writing in managing and feeling connection with pivotal relationships that had transformative effects on these women’s lives. As Karen Harvey has argued specifically, all letters ‘could generate intimacy’, something particularly visible in this set of correspondence where the authors sought to relay the gratitude to a doctor that they had trusted with their most intimate selves both emotionally and

¹²⁸ Evans, *Freedom to Choose*, p.148.

¹²⁹ Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllynne Haggerty and Karen Harvey, ‘Introduction’ in Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllynne Haggerty and Karen Harvey, (eds), *Letters and the Body, 1700-1830: Writing and Embodiment* (New York, 2023), p.1.

physically.¹³⁰ This illustrates the tangible impacts for women of receiving frank sexual advice in the space of a family planning clinic had on their lives, from their work to their relationships and their sexual pleasure.

ECS's letter specifically exposes the role of mid-century advice culture in reflective sexual story-telling decades later, and how these stories were moulded around a biographical narrative by those writing. Identifying herself with a sexual future that she had once been unable to imagine ('I never imagined that this would still be so at our age'), ECS narrated the timeline of her married sexual life with Wright's services as her doctor as a core moment of development. The result of her patient relationship with the doctor was the 'surprise and pleasure' of a fulfilling sexual life into her sixties, her explanation of which centred both the emotional and physical effects of advice culture. This is a story found elsewhere in the select correspondence archived by Wright. For instance, NP, another former patient, thanked Wright for 'looking after' her between 1952 and the mid-1960s and introducing her to two other women doctors who had life-changing effects. These relationships had set her 'on a course of self discovery' which, she wrote, 'has widened, & continued to widen, my horizons immeasurably. So in many ways my married life has been greatly enhanced by you [...]'.¹³¹ Another patient, PN, who had met Wright later in life at age forty but wished their meeting had been sooner, stated that the doctor was able to 'sort her out' after a 'troubled life'.¹³² A fourth wrote to say her eldest son had drawn her attention to Wright's 'Life Span' profile, not realising she had been one of Wright's patients,

¹³⁰ Karen Harvey, 'Sympathy in practice: Eighteenth-century letters and the material body' in Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllyne Haggerty and Karen Harvey, (eds), *Letters and the Body, 1700-1830: Writing and Embodiment* (New York, 2023), p.86.

¹³¹ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.5, letter from NP to Helena Wright (12 August 1978).

¹³² Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.5, letter from PN to Helena Wright (14 September 1977).

and the conversation that followed had prompted her to write with her gratitude to the sex expert.¹³³

Discussions of Wright's advice also allowed details of private lives to be made public, and these stories were used to give shape to narratives of sexual change. For instance, in Suzanna Stone's *Penthouse Forum* article on Wright for her ninety-first birthday, the journalist discussed her encounters with the doctor sixteen years prior:

[...] she fitted me with a Dutch Cap. [...] Dr Wright, never one to be bothered with senseless conditions, asked no questions, examined me, preached the potential joys a well-used vagina can bring and left me inspired by her vitality and sense. Not surprisingly, I was delighted when Forum gave me the opportunity to re-meet this remarkable advocate of human sexuality [...].¹³⁴

In framing her interview of the 'sex expert' around her personal encounters, Stone made the private public, and revealed the intimacies of how advice culture shaped her personal sexual story. All of these women therefore positioned Wright—and implicitly in-person sexual advice provided by her—as a characteristic feature of their sexual stories, her presence being felt at the intimate moments of their lives even decades later. From opening the possibilities for pleasurable intimacy that lasted throughout their married lives, to providing a stabilising effect in troubling times, Wright's role in their sexual stories was transformative and did not end after they stopped being her patients.

¹³³ Wellcome, PP/HRW/A.5, letter from PC to Helena Wright (4 December 1977).

¹³⁴ Wellcome, PP/PRE/J.1/11, Suzanna Stone, 'Britain's Pioneer of Sensible Love: Tribute to Dr. Helena Wright', *Penthouse Forum* (undated, circa September/October 1978), p.20.

The open-ended way ECS and NP's letters leave the narratives of their intimate lives—their ability to have pleasurable sexual relationships remained and continued to expand at the time of writing—reflects the residual and inconclusive nature of advice culture as something that permeated and endured with those who encountered it. Thinking back to Plummer's arguments around the purposes and roles of sexual story-telling that began the framing of this chapter, his conceptualising of the basic narrative structure of sexual stories is helpful: 'suffering, surviving and surpassing'.¹³⁵ This structure is evidenced to an extent in all three of the letters: ECS and NP most clearly emphasise the 'surpassing' aspect of the narrative which concludes with the attainment of sexual fulfilment, whilst PN's focus on her 'troubled' life prior to meeting Wright hints towards the full narrative arc of struggle to surpassing. Ultimately, these letters are success stories of sexual lives, where the interventions of advice culture had transformative functions with tangible impacts on their protagonists.

In telling these stories, the writers reflected on, internalised, and expressed the role of sex and advice culture in their personal biographies. Drawing on memories of experience and feeling, corresponding with Wright allowed these women to insert themselves into a broader narrative of sexual change in the twentieth century. The personal and intimate, through sexual story-telling in their letters, therefore, became part of the narrative of evolving sexual culture, and this consequently informed the letter-writer's understandings of themselves as sexual subjects. Returning to Mort's expression, the 'afterlives' of advice literature are present here, shaping the ways in which individuals understood and retold the stories of their sexual lives, giving advice culture life beyond the interwar and immediate post-war years. In particular, this speaks to

¹³⁵ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p.16.

‘afterlives’ of advice culture in terms of its effects on women’s lives, apparent in this context through the correspondence of women who had visited Wright’s clinic and decided to recount memories of it many years later. As Margareta Jolly has argued, ‘letters are especially potent forms of memory’, acting as substitutes for physical relationships, especially for women.¹³⁶ The care, affection, and gratitude expressed by Wright’s former patients is illustrative of this connection between letter writing and memory as a powerful tool for women to conduct relationships. These letters do not simply act as nostalgic remembrances of a biographical life, but they serve to reconstruct and re-tell lived sexual experiences through expressing the relational nature of encountering advice culture many years after the fact.

Conclusion: The ‘Afterlives’ of Advice Culture

In conclusion, Wright’s archive is an underused resource for exploring the evolution, impact, and meanings of advice culture across the twentieth century. In particular, reading this archive alongside other primary and secondary sources allows us to see how advice was encountered, understood, internalised, and responded to by private individuals. From the navigation of formative sexual experiences, to expressions of frustration in response to the disruptive effects of advice, to attempts to reiterate and construct knowledge by readers, men and women began to understand themselves within the context of and through advice culture. Furthermore, the gendered nature of responses to advice illustrates the differing ways in which men and women encountered it, and the parts of their lives it intersected with and spoke to. In particular, the focus on letter writing as a psychological exercise illustrates the potential of correspondence over a longer timeframe for mapping the evolving meanings and roles of advice culture in

¹³⁶ Jolly, *In Love and Struggle*, p.19.

individual lives and cultural narratives of sexual change. Recalling Jolly's feminist defence of using letters as a source, there is 'something irreducibly communicative [...] and referential' about them, and their 'expressive, excessive' nature supports a multitude of possibilities for interpretation.¹³⁷ Writing about sex in the context of advice culture was both expressive and constitutive for readers and former patients, something emphasised throughout the Wright archive.

Taking a *longue durée* approach to advice enables us to understand it within the broader context of changes in sexual culture and individual sexual lives across the century. Wright's archive is valuable in part because of the timespan the correspondence in it covers—from the 1930s until her death in 1982. Through profiles written in her final years, letters from former patients sent around her ninetieth birthday, and obituaries following her death, the writing and re-writing of Wright's life as intertwined with a narrative of sexual change across the century is visible. Individual patients wrote themselves into this narrative too, through telling sexual stories that identified how Wright's advice and medical attention shaped their private sexual, relational, and public lives in the decades following their first encounters with her. This speaks to the 'afterlives' of advice literature and culture more broadly, suggesting how as historians, we cannot understand advice given as temporally bound when it continued to resonate with and mould the lives of individuals for many years after.

¹³⁷ Jolly, *In Love and Struggle*, p.7.

CONCLUSION

Let us begin at the beginning: the arrival of the MSS. [manuscript]—the solicited and the unsolicited—which pour in daily upon the successful and old-established publishers, at times in almost overwhelming numbers. For that is the real beginning [...].¹

The history of the production, circulation, and reception of marital, sexual, and contraceptive advice literature in twentieth-century Britain and Ireland captures the ways in which print culture was part of and shaped sexual discourses and, increasingly, understandings of the self. Often, however, historians have not started at the beginning of this process—as publisher Stanley Unwin stipulated in his memoir, the point at which a publisher received a manuscript, where the publisher typically began their work with a text. Following the first printing of Marie Stopes’s *Married Love* in 1918, in the context of an increasingly commercialised book market where sex sold, the production of advice texts exploded. Publishing archives are an underused resource for understanding the mechanics of how such books came into being, how and where they were dispersed, and what encounters with them involved and meant culturally and socially. As this thesis has shown, by beginning with the publishing archive we move beyond narratives of the evolution of advice culture that have begun with and foregrounded *Married Love*, enabling us to piece together a complicated map of the mediating networks, individuals, and institutions that put developing sexual knowledges into print and facilitated a popular market for them.

¹ Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About Publishing*, third edition (London, 1929), p.17.

Yet publishing archives are difficult to use and sometimes patchy representations of the tapestry of book production, circulation, and encounter. The George Allen & Unwin Ltd (A&U) archive that inspired the direction of this thesis is unusually large—over an estimated million-and-a-half pieces of paper—with many other publishing records split between private collectors, booksellers, and archives.² Despite this, it still contains considerable gaps, from where wartime conditions impacted the survival and cataloguing of material, to Stanley Unwin’s habit of being an ‘inveterate collector’ of letters from famous figures.³ Publishers, before archivists even get their hands on their papers, determined whose voices were heard in the archival record, just as they ultimately determined whose work was published and, in the context of this thesis, who produced sexual knowledges for a public readership. When beginning research for this thesis, I attempted to follow up numerous leads for smaller publishers who produced advice books to find that their archives were scattered across countries and often remedially catalogued, if at all. One antiquarian bookseller told me I could visit their stockroom to catalogue boxes of loose correspondence myself. Thus the archival conditions have no doubt impacted the historian’s desire to use such sources and meant that this thesis had to go significantly beyond this focus to produce a more detailed map of the networks, individuals, and institutions foregrounded here.

In exploring these archives, then, this thesis has demonstrated how, where, and through which institutions and individuals advice literature and the ideas it contained moved across the century. Foremost, this has been a history of networks and markets. I have emphasised transnational consumer culture as an important mode for the diffusion of ideas about sex, bodies, and desires between Britain, Ireland, and the United States, demonstrating the porosity of national borders

² Brian Ryder, ‘The George Allen & Unwin Collection: Reading University Library’, *Publishing History*, 47 (2000), p.70.

³ *Ibid*, pp.67-68.

in this context through looking critically at censorship apparatus and publisher and bookseller efforts to navigate this. In doing so, I have delved into the relationships and connections formed between publishers and ‘sex experts’ that were foundational to the production of knowledges in the first place, but also to the physical ways in which these knowledges were compiled and circulated. Through exploring the networks of transnational consumption in this way, I have shown how the interests, concerns, and political and personal motivations of publishers were instrumental in determining which books made it to market, but equally important were the external factors such as censorship, respectability politics, and commercial viability. In this way, this thesis has emphasised the polyvocal and complicated processes behind advice books as commercial products defined by competing motivations, gatekeeping, and efforts to render sex respectable.

Related to this, the markets and networks that underpinned the process of knowledge production and diffusion of sex advice literature for a public audience had previously ‘eluded scrutiny’, in the words of Laura Doan.⁴ To respond to this critique pertaining to a lack of specificity in discussions of knowledge circulation, audiences, and encounters with advice culture, I unpacked in depth where and how different people came into contact with advice, expanding definitions of ‘access’. In doing so, I thought through exactly what it felt like, physically and emotionally, to encounter such books, tracing the circulation of advice texts through different spatial and material settings—department stores, bookshops, and libraries—between the 1930s and 1950s in Britain and Ireland. Where and how books were encountered was as important as

⁴ Laura Doan, ‘Troubling Popularisation: On the Gendered Circuits of a ‘Scientific’ Knowledge of Sex’, *Gender & History*, 31:2 (2019), pp.308.

their contents in the circulation of ideas and knowledge.⁵ Many of these moments of encounter are only alluded to in incomplete terms in textual sources. I was therefore inspired by Constance Classen's suggestion to 'move sideways from a suggestive phrase'—for example, a brief note about a book's pages being dog-eared, or a description of where a particular book was or was not displayed—to seek out the sensory and embodied experiences of access by bringing together a variety of sources to extrapolate and add colour to these often fleetingly preserved moments.⁶

I also emphasised how experiences of encounter were mediated within and through different bodies, placing particular emphasis on disability through exploring the supply of advice books in braille through the National Library for the Blind (NLB). In doing so, I argued that the history of advice culture is inseparable from histories of disability, especially because sex advice and birth control rhetoric was so deeply intertwined with eugenics discourses across the twentieth century in Britain and beyond. Shaping perceptions of disabled bodies and sexual lives at a moment when the embodied and psychological self was increasingly seen as a project to be fashioned, it mattered who, how, and why ideas about sex as a self-improvement tool were being encountered.⁷ My novel approach here therefore foregrounds how a mesh of archival material incorporating the sensory, material, visual, and written can be used to imagine the multiplicity of moments of encounter and meanings of such encounters with sexual knowledges

⁵ Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914* (Aldershot, 2006), p.11; Lucy Delap, 'Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974-2000', *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), pp.171-196.

⁶ Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana, 2012), p.xxvii; Alice Garner, *The Shifting Shore: Locals, Outsiders, and the Transformation of a French Fishing Town, 1823-2000* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), p.7.

⁷ Ruby Ray Daily, 'Dear Dr K': Mobility, Sex, and Selfhood in Alfred Kinsey's British World Correspondence, 1948-58', *Twentieth Century British History*, 32:1 (2021), pp.26-27.

as they moved within and through everyday spaces. From this, I have shown how advice literature occupied a 'grey zone' or 'middle ground' of sexual culture identifiable within these public spaces, framing it as simultaneously salacious and respectable, managed and regulated yet part of the everyday and much more pervasive than has often been recognised.⁸

Encounters with advice culture not only held cultural meanings, but individual, personal meanings too. Analysing correspondence from the interwar and immediate post-war period in the archive of Dr Helena Wright, and correspondence sent to the State and Catholic Church in Ireland, this thesis has demonstrated that reader engagements with advice books were often detailed, active, and conversational, arguing that sexual knowledges in the minds of the reading public were co-produced.⁹ Letters to 'sex experts' had a psychological function, allowing readers to transform the lived experience of their sexual lives, which were sometimes extremely distressing or disruptive.¹⁰ They could also be used as expressive documents filled with memories that acted as substitutes for physical relationships, especially for women, something I illustrate through Wright's readers' and former patients' correspondence that built intimacy and meaning in retellings of their sexual lives.¹¹ Placing all of this correspondence within the framework of 'sexual story-telling' detailed by Ken Plummer, this analysis shows that letters to

⁸ Anna Clark, 'Twilight Moments', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14:1-2 (2005), pp.139-160; Sarah Bull, 'Obscenity and the Publication of Sexual Science in Britain, 1810-1914', Simon Fraser University, PhD thesis, 2014, pp.iii, 1-3; Peter Bailey, 'Parasexuality and Glamour: the Victorian Barmaid as Cultural Prototype', *Gender & History*, 2:2 (1990), pp.148-172.

⁹ Peter Mandler, 'Good Reading for the Million: The 'Paperback Revolution' and the Co-Production of Academic Knowledge in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain and America', *Past & Present*, 244 (2019), pp.236-237.

¹⁰ Michael Roper, 'Splitting in Unsent Letters: Writing as a Social Practice and a Psychological Activity', *Social History*, 26:3 (2001), pp.319-321.

¹¹ Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (Columbia, 2008), p.19.

‘sex experts’ are extremely significant sources for determining and locating the individual and cultural significance of advice culture in the evolution of public and private sexual life across the twentieth century, a time when the sexual was increasingly part of understandings of the self.¹²

Reading the correspondence, memoirs, and other ephemera in the range of archives used in this thesis against the grain ultimately paints a picture of the ways in which publishers, ‘sex experts’, and individuals who encountered advice culture constructed narratives of social and cultural change through their involvement in the production and circulation of books about sex. These historical actors, repeatedly writing and re-writing stories of their involvement in the production of books containing popular sexual knowledges, inserted themselves into teleological stories of sexual change across the century. In attempting this, publishers, ‘sex experts’, and those who reflected on their work solidified their relevance as both ‘pioneers’ and facilitators of change, and laid claim to the cultural prestige that came with this. Men’s voices often dominated in this context, simplifying and side-lining the roles of women in these narratives, and over-privileging men’s contributions as a result. Additionally, individuals who encountered advice culture also wrote themselves into histories of sexual change in and through their correspondence with ‘sex experts’. Letters from former patients to Wright around her ninetieth birthday demonstrate this beautifully, showing how advice could have lasting impacts on its recipients. These letters were

¹² Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London, 1995), pp.5,16; Claire Langhamer, ‘Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain’, *Cultural and Social History*, 9:2 (2012), p.278; Matt Houlbrook, “‘A Pin to See the Peepshow’: Culture, Fiction and Selfhood in Edith Thompson’s Letters, 1921-22”, *Past and Present*, 207 (2019), pp.215-249; Matt Houlbrook, ‘Commodifying the Self Within: Ghosts, Libels, and the Crook Life Story in Interwar Britain’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 85:2 (2013), p.321-363; Anna Clark, *Alternative Histories of the Self: A Cultural History of Sexuality and Secrets, 1762-1917* (London, 2017); Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), p.4.

not simply nostalgic remembrances but used bibliographical narratives to reconstruct and re-tell sexual experiences through the lens of advice culture, mapping intimate lives onto a teleology of sexual change across the century.

This thesis has therefore taken a *longue durée* approach to advice between the interwar period and the late-1980s in Britain, Ireland, and beyond. Borrowing Frank Mort's phrasing, it has shown how advice culture had many 'afterlives' beyond its immediate reception.¹³ Different temporalities—individual biographies, the sexual life cycle, and narratives of sexual change—come together in the archives to narrate a story of 'sexual revolution' across the twentieth century that placed advice culture at the centre. In exploring this, this thesis has complicated teleological narratives of repression and transformation that have been used, especially in a popular cultural context, to package sexual change across the twentieth century. Whilst the *Yesterday's Witness* transcript from 1969 that began this thesis may have cast 'sex experts' and their published and clinical work in defining roles in this story, the development of sexual culture mapped in this thesis is considerably more textured.¹⁴ In doing so, this thesis emphasises the long-term significance of advice culture within personal lives and public discourses surrounding sex, both in terms of the ways in which it shaped social and cultural understandings of sex, bodies, and desires, and the impacts it had on conceptualisations of the self and individual intimate relationships.

¹³ Frank Mort, 'Victorian Afterlives: Sexuality and identity in the 1960s and 1970s', *History Workshop Journal*, 82:1 (2016), pp.199-212.

¹⁴ Wellcome, Philip Rainsford Evans and Barbara Evans Papers (henceforth: PP/PRE), PP/PRE/J.1/11, 'Yesterday's Witness' transcript; Peet, Stephen, producer, 'Yesterday's Witness: Birth Control in the Twenties', *BBC Two* (21 April 1969).

This thesis is ultimately about how ideas and material things came into being, changed, and moved through worlds that were simultaneously intimate and transnational. I have shown that the making and remaking of sexual culture happened in publishing houses, through networks and markets, in retail spaces and libraries, in individual encounters, in and through correspondence, and in the intimate reflections of those who occupied these spaces, institutions, and moments. In these ways, the making and movement of modern forms of sexual knowledge were crucially underpinned by the work of networks and markets in publishing, as well as the wider publishing industry, and their interactions with the institutions of state and law, and individual and collective readers. Despite this being crucial, the detail of these networks and interactions has hitherto neglected by historians of sexuality, which is where this thesis intervenes. Changing focus to the nature of British and Irish publishing across the century, this thesis has also shown how the relationships and networks that defined the industry in this period were fundamentally shaped and changed by publishers' involvement in the production of advice literature and therefore broader sexual culture. The production, circulation, and reception of advice literature was therefore underpinned by a complex, polyvocal cast of mediating individuals, institutions, markets, and locations in and through which Britain and Ireland's sexual culture grew and shifted across the century, all apparent with close attention to the correspondence and ephemera contained in publishing archives.

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