

BOOK REVIEW

Melanie Reynolds¹

***Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper*, Lucy Bland. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 272 pp. £17.99, ISBN 0719082641, 9780719082641**

Lucy Bland's book *Modern Women on Trial* is a welcome edition to gender history; a discipline which as Joanne Bailey claims, is 'organised around women, their life cycles and their concerns.' By structuring the book around five infamous case studies of 'flappers' during 1918 to late 1923, who were tried at the Old Bailey, we get an excellent cultural insight into flapper's lives. Set just before or after women over the age of 30 won the vote, the book gives an excellent insight into how these women used their new-found legitimacy, after the ravages of the First World War, and found their feet to act as 'new women': ones whose emancipated dress sense distinguished them as utterly different from those who had worn Victorian corsets.

Whilst many women welcomed their husbands back from the First World War and then reverted to their gender stereotype, Bland's women savagely bucked this trend. They lived independent lives of confidence – using the social cultural mix which arose out of the First World War as a consequence of classes being thrown together as never before, and mixed with an array of men and women from all classes and all countries. Bland shows, well, the difficulties Britain, or its men had in dealing with these decadent and carefree women who they considered were patronising with the enemy.

For these women the past was their foreign country. In their present, they were not only willing to form friendships and relationships with people from different countries and classes, but also to raise their hemlines and throw themselves into what was considered the very 'manly' sport of night life of nightclubs and bars. In doing so, they engaged in the very male public sphere in a novel way, making Britain face these 'new women' head on who were determined to live their lives as they wished, not beholden to men.

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Rejecting the strait-jacket of marriage and its cohabiting concepts of 'respectability' and 'stability', these women knew what they wanted and went for it. Although Britain was in a state of flux since not knowing which part of the past to hold on to and which to let go the flappers were pioneers and led the way. Their *raison d'être* was not to obtain political equality. Instead, they aspired to achieve participation in a new social culture, inventing new cocktails and patronising the new nightclubs where modern jazz played all night long. Bland depicts the life style of women who forged a new social and cultural consumptive identity, rather than a political one during the inter-war period: thus the book singles their style of dress out as representative of their status as 'new' women.

Although flappers paved the way for a less serious character of women, in being apolitical they were arguably no less dangerous to the establishment than their political sisters. As the cases illustrate, these women were not immune to criminal behaviour and provides insight into the 1920s female criminal culture, and in doing so the book reveals these women as 'real' with all the foibles of ordinary women who took decisive action to live their lives, and could defend themselves when necessary. Women were no stranger to the 'crime and punishment' pages but the women who usually peppered the press with their misdemeanours were working-class women, who got involved in bar room brawls or neglected their children. The flapper was instead representative of middle and upper class women who transgressed the gender and class morals they were supposed to uphold. These trials allow us a ringside seat to view the evidence on this 'new modern women'; ones who through wit and whims caused contemporary sensation and uproar. Through these cases, the book does well to get at the insight of what being a 'modern woman meant', and through the prism of the trials of women who characterised themselves as flappers.

The methodology is sound. It uses the feminist, gender and crime lens well to investigate the material of newspaper and trial reports. It gives an inspired sense of how these women coped with the barristers and lawyers in court. They were not afraid not intimidated, indeed Christabel Russell (my favourite reading) was in her element dealing with the barristers and lawyers questions with wit and erudition. The trial transcripts allow us an insight into seeing the warmth and wit of the women, and how they saw their lives as ordinary and no different to the women next door. In particular the verbatim reports from Maud Allen's case add a richness to the book.

In some respects however the method has problems. The majority of the defamation comes from middle class and upper class men. Newspaper editors such as Northcliffe used their newspapers to portray women who step out of the mold as immoral and of lewd character. Thus, in the words of Mandy Rice Davis, we should not be surprised that their opinions were such and that they said such things. The editors were merely doing what their readership would expect them to do in singling out for attention the examples of women who, as supposed defenders of the female moral code, instead broke every rule, in their opinion, aligned to it. Moreover, overall, flappers were few, and their trials were attended by a narrow socio-cohort; mainly a few unemployed men and the flapper's friends and family, who were mainly middle class in nature. Moreover, other than in Russell's case, the women and cases which Bland discusses did not have children, unlike the majority of women during this period. This book does little to address this gap in the feminist debate and adds little to our understanding of the agency taken by women with children who sought to take control of their lives with children in tow. Where are these women, because this is where feminism becomes real, as the majority of women who struggle with misogyny are women with children. As Maureen Freely wrote, women with children are left out of the feminist equation and have to write themselves into it. But as Freely asks herself a feminist and mother, 'what about me', do feminists consider me worthy of help? Do women with children factor into the feminist debate? And if so where are they? Mums-net is currently addressing the questions but we need to know more of these women who acted thus in the past because this is where true enfranchise for women lays. Finding the women who lobbied and argued thus is pivotal for feminism because they paved the way as once good and affordable childcare is provided, it will give women choices. The availability of good childcare stands in the way of this now as it did in the last century. Historically some women did this and the truly radical women were those who engaged in politics, and feminism and into the real dirty public sphere where they took on men. Ellen Wilkinson, the first Labour MP in 1924 was herself a snazzy dresser and interested in make-up, and she spent her life arguing for the improvements in the lives of the working-classes. Early twentieth feminists won new reforms such as the right to increased maintenance orders from 10s to 20s and child allowance 5s for the first child and 3s for their siblings. We just need to know about more of them.

Chapter One concerns the trial of Maud Allen, an erotic dancer in 1918. Maud Allen an extremely popular exotic 'barefoot' dancer in 1918 was not afraid to take on

controversial roles. Bland depicts Allen as an independent 'girl about town', who without the guidance of a man made her own way in life supported by her dance performances, and her friend Margo Asquith. Her dances and her way of life came to the attention of Noel Pemberton Billing who was concerned as to the effect Allen and her dancing had on the morality of Britain. Billing argued that as a consequence of her life-style and controversial choice of acting parts, she was no more than a hussy and accused of 'lesbianism' with her alleged partner, Margo Asquith, the wife of Herbert Asquith, leader of the Liberal Party and Prime Minister during the early part of the twentieth century. Using every tenuous link he could muster, Billing defamed Allen, identifying her as 'lewd, un-chaste and immoral' and who gave private obscene performances 'designed to foster and encourage obscene unnatural practices amongst women' (p.18). Billing's dislike of women such as Allen was similar to that of how he identified feminists and fury and ire was circulated widely amongst his readership.

Chapter Two documents women such as Freda Kempton, who, from a well-heeled family, gained employment like others from her background in nightclubs as dancers and dance instructors. This new-found type of employment enabled these women again to support themselves financially and again buck the trend of the 'respectable married woman'. They could live single lives, making use of exclusive rented apartments which their earnings allowed them to do. This new-waged public sphere was a new avenue for middle class women to make their own way in life and through the trials, Bland shows us that women like Kate Merrick were very capable business women as they owned and ran nightclubs. Forming relationships both platonic and sexual 'men of the east', these women were not afraid to choose outside the British gene pool, and say that the men they had chosen were extremely good husbands and fathers. Accused of miscegenation, clearly these women made their own choices with regards to husbands, yet they were described as vulnerable and susceptible.

Set in 1923, Chapter Three documents the life of Edith Thompson, a lower middle class woman, who committed adultery against her husband Percy with her lover Freddy. This adulterous behaviour made Edith step out of the realms of obscurity into the limelight because her lover was so taken with Edith that he shot her husband, who had refused to divorce her. By association, Edith was implicated in the subsequent murder case. Financially independent, and a woman comfortable in her own skin, Edith's sexual linguistics as evidenced by her letters to him were anathema

to judge and jury alike, because it described scenes reminiscent of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was to remain banned until the 1960s. Consequently, the judge presiding over her case identified her as stepping out of the boundaries laid for middle class women of 'household law' and 'marital faith'. Yet in Edith we see an extremely articulate woman with a love of books, and one who used her writing to describe how she wished to conduct her sex life. As a consequence of her confidence and articulation, Edith went to the gallows.

Chapter Four relates the case of Marguerite Fahmy. Marguerite was indicted for killing her husband Ali Fahmy by shooting him three times after becoming disillusioned with her husband's sexual desires and being denied a divorce. Marguerite's husband was powerful as one of 'Egypt's richest men', but Bland portrays Marguerite as a woman not afraid to speak her mind to her husband and one who had a decisive nature. Her early life showed her working as a prostitute, thus shunning marital conventions. Marguerite clearly wanted to have some sort of control over her marriage and rejected his sexual demands of sodomy described as his 'brutality and beastliness' at the trial. Claiming that her husband died accidentally, or that she shot him 'because he had threatened to kill her', Marguerite after being denied a divorce took matters into her own hands and walked free from the court room and rid of the husband she so clearly disliked.

Chapter Five relates the trial of Christabel Russell. In 1923 she took her husband to court over her son's legitimate status, a claim complicated by her refusing to sleep with him. Bland's depiction of Christabel is excellent. Again Russell was a woman comfortable in her own skin. She danced, hunted, played tennis, had a licence to drive a car and a motorbike and flew an aeroplane and living life as she wanted. According to Bland, Russell was 'exceedingly unconventional', was 'asexual' and merely married to stop her being pestered with invitations. Her marriage did little to quell her independent nature. She was an extremely capable business-woman overseeing 2000 women in a munitions factory during WWI. In 1916, she was working as a buyer for Whitworth's Engineering Company, and also along with her mother, she owned and ran a successful dress shop in London. She also supported her husband who was unemployed. Christabel was noted for her quick wit in dealing with her husband's barristers and lawyers. If Christabel was the face of the future, for male barristers, lawyers and newspapers editors alike, then the future looked bleak.

Overall

What we learn from this book is that they were a few women of a certain class who spent their lives and money in a way which was very different to the majority of women during the period and who paved the way for the new consumptive society. Yet, this book is important because it flags up cases of yet more men seeking to defame women and their lives; in doing so we see the problems this misogyny caused for the women. Moreover, a positive aspect of this book is in showing us the fight, agency and strength of the women concerned in dealing with misogyny. It tells us what the women 'did' in retaliation to their defamation, and this is to be applauded.