



## The Victorians Gender and Sexuality Professor Sir Richard Evans FBA

14 February 2011

I began this series of lectures last Autumn with an account of Thomas Bowdler and his prudish editions of Shakespeare (1) and the way they helped shape Victorian attitudes to gender and sexuality. The popularity of Bowdler's editions suggested that Victorian culture was characterized by a sharp distinction between men and women, the male public sphere and the female private sphere, the sexually active man and the sexually passive woman, all united in a belief in sexual restraint, however hypocritical, a stern moralism, and a reluctance to discuss or exhibit any form of sexuality in public. Victorian became a common synonym for prudery well before the outbreak of the First World War.

'Prudery', as Leslie Stephen (2) remarked, 'is a bad thing', but it was not as bad, he went on to say, as 'the prurience of Sterne, the laxness of Fielding, the unwholesome atmosphere of Balzac'. Charlotte Brontë advised people to avoid the 'revolting' lewd passages in Shakespeare, to use Brontë's term, while the art critic John Ruskin (3) railed against 'forms of humour which render some of quite the greatest, wisest, and most moral of English writers now almost useless for our youth.' Ruskin indeed, famously, was familiar with women's bodies only through paintings, and, it is said, when he was confronted by the reality of his wife's own naked body, he was so shocked by the fact that she had pubic hair that he was unable to have intercourse with her. Effie Gray, seen here in a portrait by Thomas Richmond (4), later divorced him; but the story became emblematic of the ignorance that Victorian attitudes to sex could lead to. Attitudes only changed at the end of the century, when the sexual radical Edward Carpenter and the sexologist Havelock Ellis condemned what the former called 'the "impure hush" on matters of sex...the cruel barring of women from every natural and useful expression of their lives' which were 'carried to an extremity of folly difficult for us now to realize.'

Among the classic texts of the Victorian period often quoted by historians is the treatise published in 1857 by the leading gynaecologist Dr William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in the Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations*, in which he stated baldly: 'The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind.' This has been widely taken by historians as a typical Victorian belief shared by men and women alike. As Walter Houghton wrote in his classic book on *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, published in 1957:

In the Victorian home swarming with children sex was a secret. It was the skeleton in the parental chamber. No one mentioned it. This conspiracy of silence....sprang from a personal feeling of revulsion. For the sexual act was associated by many wives only with a duty and by most husbands with a necessary if pleasureable yielding to one's baser nature...The silence which first aroused in the child a vague sense of shame was in fact a reflection of parental shame, and one suspects that some women, at any rate, would have been happy if the stork had been a reality.

Women, and above all mothers, were the objects of sentimental idealization in Victorian literature and poetry. Fidelity within marriage, Houghton notes, was 'the supreme virtue, and sexual irregularity the blackest of sins...Adultery, especially in the case of a wife, and no matter what the extenuating circumstances, was spoken of with horror. A "feeble and erring woman" became, in fact, a social outcast.

For men, the Victorian ideal of manliness became a way of controlling the feral forces and base instincts of maleness. The Victorian cult of manliness involved the diversion of these base instincts into disciplined aggression; it's not too fanciful to think of the Victorian invention of modern sports, many if not most of which were pioneered in the public schools of the day, as a form of displacement for sexual urges into

physical aggression. Charles Kingsley, the writer and historian, seen here in old age (5), was the epitome of what became known as “muscular Christianity” – it was no use, he once remarked, “telling people what’s right...If you want to get mankind, if not to heaven, at least out of hell, kick them out.” When he was not studying or writing, Kingsley spent his time hunting, shooting and fishing and preaching “a healthful and manly Christianity one which does not exalt the feminine virtues to the exclusion of the masculine”. When he came to consider the poets of an earlier generation, he unhesitatingly declared that “Shelley’s nature is utterly womanish”, (6) not just because of its lack of manly virtues but also because of his “physical distaste for meat and fermented liquors” – far preferable was Lord Byron, “the sturdy peer proud of his bull neck and his boxing, who kept bears and bull-dogs, drilled Greek ruffians at Missolonghi, and ‘had no objection to a pot of beer’”. True, his morals left much to be desired, but, Kingsley declared, he “might, if he had reformed, have made a gallant English gentleman.”

Leslie Stephen, similarly, differentiated between Lord Macaulay – “a thoroughly manly writer” and John Stuart Mill, whose doctrine of the equality of the sexes appeared to him to indicate “a hopeless thinness of character”. Mill, he declared roundly, needed “some red blood infused into his veins”. The literary epitome of manliness was of course Tom Brown, (7) whose declared ambition at Rugby School was “to be A1 at cricket and football, and all the other games...I want to leave me...the name of a fellow who never bullied a little boy, or turned his back on a big one.” Brown came from what Thomas Hughes described as a “fighting family” for what, Hughes asked, “what would like be without fighting, I should like to know? From the cradle to the grave, fighting, rightly understood, is the business, the real, highest, honestest business of every son of man.” “What”, asked the poet Robert Browning rhetorically, “had I on earth to do/With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly?” The cult of the manly culminated in the cult of the hero as championed by Thomas Carlyle, the titanic, superhuman man who swept all his enemies aside and dominated history with his power and aggression.

As you will already have noticed from the pictures I’ve shown of Leslie Stephen, John Ruskin and Charles Kingsley, manliness for the Victorians was expressed physically in the form of beards and moustaches, which characterized virtually all the great Victorians, from the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson (8) to the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury (9). But beards, as the earlier illustration of the poet Shelley suggested, were not the fashion in the earlier decades of the 19th century. Indeed both Ruskin (10) and Kingsley grew their beards relatively late in life; here they are in the 1850s, and here’s a photograph of Leslie Stephen at roughly the same time (11). It’s worth pausing for a moment, therefore to consider the significance of the rise and fall of the Victorian beard; it can tell us more than you might at first glance think about the nature of gender, of masculinity and femininity, in Victorian Britain.

Beards became common not from the Crimean War in homage to the bearded heroes returning from the front, as G.M. Trevelyan maintained, but earlier, indeed from the late 1840s onwards. Already in 1852 Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine announced: ‘Already the martial moustache, the haughty Imperial, and the daily expanding whiskers, like accredited heralds, proclaim the approaching advent of the monarch Beard; the centuries of his banishment are drawing to their destined close, and the hour and the man are at hand to re-establish his ancient reign.’ As Christopher Oldstone-Moore has remarked in his recent article on ‘the beard movement in Victorian Britain’, beards up to now had been a sign of political or cultural unconventionality, the property of ‘artists and Chartists’. Now however, following the collapse of the Chartist movement and the defeat of the European revolutions in 1848, they became respectable. ‘Why shave?’ was the title of an article in Charles Dickens’s Household Words in the mid-1850s, and it was soon followed by an Essay in Defence of the Beard by James Ward, and an anonymous tract entitled The Beard! Why do we cut it off?

This trend had little to do with technology, in fact defied it, as more and more men spurned the advantages brought by William Henson’s invention of the safety razor in 1847 (12) Indeed Henson himself seems to have made relatively little use of his own invention. (13) Why did he and so many other Victorian gentlemen opt for a life without shaving, then? As Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, in a debunking book worthy to stand alongside Lytton Strachey’s, called in this case Those Earnest Victorians, published in 1930, speculated: “There is perhaps some connection between...aggressive manliness and the almost equally aggressive hairiness flaunted by the male sex at this time.” And indeed the beard, as a signifier of manliness, accompanied the rise of organized sports at the same time, reaching a peak in the 1870s, when a statistical survey has recently concluded that half of the men whose pictures appeared in the Illustrated London News carried a full beard. Indeed, so anxious did young men become if they had difficulty in growing a full beard that unscrupulous businessmen began to offer potions for sale such as the ‘beard generator’, which guaranteed success within four to six weeks. (14)

The epitomes of manliness in mid-century were the soldier and the medieval knight, and in both cases facial hair was present; the magnificent moustaches of Napoleon's old guard were widely admired, while the fashion for medieval chivalry led artists like Landseer to show knights as bearded, and in preparation for the Eglinton tournament of 1839, participants actually grew beards or moustaches to appear authentic, and in some cases kept them on afterwards (as shown in the contemporary illustration by James Henry Nixon). (15) Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present*, published in 1843, described the beard worn by its hero, the medieval Abbot Samson, on no fewer than four different occasions, comparing him to the Biblical strongman Samson, whose masculine strength resided in his beard and vanished when it was cut off by the treacherous Delilah, and Carlyle proclaimed a general need in his own time for 'born champions, strong men, and liberatory Samsons of this poor world; whom the Delilah-world will not always shear of their strength and eyesight.' 'Our forefathers', proclaimed Charles Kingsley, 'were not ashamed of their beards', and he condemned Catholicism not least because its monks and friars went one step further than shaving their beards and shaved their heads as well. In his Elizabethan adventure story *Westward Ho!* indeed, Kingsley calibrated his heroes and villains according to the length of their beard, with Jesuits being clean-shaven, effete courtiers wearing little pointy beards or waxed moustaches, and only the hero Amyas Leigh equipped with the true signifier of masculinity, the full-length beard.

Beards had truly arrived when they began to be satirized in *Punch*, where John Leech recognized them as still relatively novel in 1853 in his portrayal of a female traveler mistaking the sailors on her ship for brigands (16). Ideals of masculinity, such as big-game hunters, or explorers, or fashionable pioneers of Alpine mountaineering such as Albert Smith, (17) wore beards of necessity, but their image was undoubtedly influential in spreading the fashion. Charles Dickens grew a beard, (18) joking that his friends liked it because it meant they saw less of him, and so too did Thomas Carlyle. (19) Some justified their decision to become more hirsute on medical reasoning, as the miasmatic theory of disease, dominant in mid-century, prompted the idea that the beard could be a filter against dangerous and unhealthy vapours. (20) But above all, as Alexander Rowland remarked in his essay on *The Beard*, 'as a rule, every man with a beard is a man of strongly marked individuality – frequently genius – has formed his own opinions – is straightforward – to a certain degree, frequently reckless, but will not fawn or cringe to any man.' A beard made it easier for a man to present an impassive face to the world, avoiding the weak expressions of emotion that were the characteristic of the female sex. It gave him 'sternness, dignity and strength' in his appearance.

It seems clear that the emergence of this new model of masculinity around mid-century was a response among other things to changes in the status and role of women. Large-scale social and cultural changes were at work here. As industrialization and urbanization gathered pace from the 1820s onwards, the professions, business, industry and finance grew in size and influence, and the expanding middle classes asserted themselves in a growing number of ways, symbolized perhaps above all in the 1832 Parliamentary Reform Act, which extended voting rights to them and reformed the corrupt and antiquated system of constituencies. Respectability was the cornerstone of a middle-class existence, and for women in particular it meant sexual respectability.

The emerging working classes too began to espouse respectable values, above all after the defeat of Chartism and the foundation of the new model trade union movement. Industrialization, the growth of the factory system, and the replacement of household production with wage labour, brought about a growing separation of the sexes in the world of work, with men working in mining, heavy industry and engineering, women in textiles, food processing and production or domestic service. Women became more economically dependent on men, particularly after marriage, when wage labour was more difficult to come by, especially if they had children, who were not just a drain on resources but also a drain on women's time that prevented them from seeking paid employment. And children themselves, an asset to the farming or rural labouring population, became a burden and an expense, especially as legislation was introduced to limit or ban child labour.

In Britain's fast-growing urban society, the spectre of overpopulation in a general sense loomed large, with the warnings of Thomas Malthus (21) about the dire consequences of too many mouths to feed ringing in the ears of many. So there were growing pressures to have fewer children. The average number of children per middle-class family in the 1850s was six, and even if one or two of them died in infancy, the burden on the Victorian mother was considerable. People reacted to this difficult situation in part by getting married later – the average age at marriage for men was 30 in mid-century – meaning that more than a third of women aged 25 to 34 were single or widowed according to the census of 1851.

This was a world in which there was no contraceptive pill, and mechanical methods of contraception were ineffective and not widely available. The vulcanization of rubber in 1844 enabled the Goodyear tyre company to produce rubber condoms from the mid-1850s (they were apparently about the thickness of a bicycle inner tube), but they were expensive and still unreliable. Other methods of contraception, including withdrawal, promoted by the sex manuals that began to be published from the 1820s onwards, were poorly understood and even less effective. The only safe method was abstinence, and since it was women who bore the risk of pregnancy and all the consequent burdens, it was women who began to repress their sexual feelings. The idea that women were incapable of sexuality, an idea that would have seemed strange in the eighteenth century, became more common, and it was reinforced by the growing male dominance within the middle-class and respectable working-class home, as the paterfamilias demanded deference and modesty from his wife and daughters, who would, it was feared, undermine his authority if they flirted with other men or displayed a threatening degree of sexual knowledge. Daughters had to remain chaste until marriage, for here too an unwanted pregnancy could ruin a family's reputation and impose undesirable financial burdens.

On a national scale, the illegitimate birth rate began to fall in the 1840s, and continued to decline to the end of the century; women in other words were having less sex outside marriage. But what about men? Chastity, restraint, abstinence, were certainly preached by some. In *Tom Brown at Oxford*, the sequel to *Tom Brown's Schooldays* by Thomas Hughes, published in 1861, (22) the young hero's reaction when attracted by the charms of a barmaid is to fight against the temptation and do his best to remain pure – a reaction that, as Walter Houghton remarks, would have been unthinkable in the eighteenth century. Purity before marriage was another ideal which middle-class Victorians preached. For the Knights of the Round Table in Tennyson's epic Arthurian romances, purity is the supreme virtue, and the downfall of Camelot is brought about not least by the infidelity of Queen Guinevere. (23)

As Coventry Patmore's long poem *Angel in the House*, written in the late 1850s, put it:

They safely walk in darkest ways

Whose youth is lighted from above,

Where, through the senses' silvery haze,

Dawns the veil'd moon of nuptial love.

Who is the happy husband? He

Who, scanning his unwedded life,

Thanks Heaven, with a conscience free,

'Twas faithful to his future wife.

As this suggests, Evangelical religion was a powerful force behind the emergence of these ideals, a force I'll be saying more about in a later lecture in this series.

Yet even at the time, commentators noted that many men failed to live up to these lofty ideals. They did not after all directly have to bear the cost of childbirth and childrearing. In this situation, as observers began to notice not long before the middle of the century, they sublimated their sexual urges in sports and similar



physically vigorous activities – here for example is W.G. Grace (24) in full flow, the first cricketing superstar. They also used the rapidly expanding pornography industry, boosted by the arrival of photography – mild in the extreme by today's standards. (25) More importantly, however, they also began to have recourse to the growing numbers of prostitutes who, responding to this demand and often led to engage in the sex trade for want of other means of earning a living, increasingly thronged the streets and public places of Britain's towns and cities.

The best statistical indicator of this can be found in death rates from syphilis, which rose very sharply from 1850 up to the end of the 1860s, then leveled off, to decline from the mid-1880s onwards. As late as the mid-1920s it was killing 60,000 people a year in England and Wales, compared to 41,000 a year who died from tuberculosis. Since the disease had a generally low mortality rate, this means that the number of people infected must have been many times greater. In 1864, indeed, nearly 30 per cent of all troops in the UK were said to be infected with sexually transmitted diseases including syphilis. Middle-class men and unskilled urban labourers were most affected; agricultural workers least. Here's a French drawing from 1851 illustrating the dangers of infection for the unsuspecting man and incidentally showing that contemporary concerns were all for the male victims of the disease. (26).

As this suggests, there was a widespread assumption that prostitutes were the major source of infection. Dr William Acton, however, also declared that prostitution was a necessary evil to protect the sanctity of courtship and marriage in a situation where respectable women were not susceptible to sexual feelings. The solution in the minds of men like Acton, and of military reformers who were concerned about the spread of disease in the army and navy, was to follow French and German practice and forcibly register prostitutes, subject them to regular medical examination, and arrest any woman who was suspected of working in the sex trade and make her undergo the same treatment, and indeed this is exactly what happened in the 1860s with the passage through Parliament of the Contagious Diseases Acts.

Acton thought that spotting the women who should be arrested and incarcerated was easy enough. 'Who', he asked,

Who are those fair creatures, neither chaperones nor chaperoned: those "somebodies whom nobody knows", who elbow our wives and daughters in the parts and promenades and rendez-vous of fashion? Who are those painted, dressy women flaunting along the streets and boldly accosting the passer-by? Who those miserable creatures, ill-fed, ill-clothed, uncared-for, from whose misery the eye recoils, cowering under dark arches and among bye-lanes?

Acton's answer, and that of the administrators of the Acts, was clear; they were all prostitutes. But of course in effect, they could be any woman who seemed to be indulging in sex before marriage, or carrying on serial non-marital relationships, or even walking around unchaperoned. (27)

This was precisely what angered social reformers like Josephine Butler, who, when a National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts was founded for men only in 1869, quickly set up a Ladies' National Association that soon took the lead in the campaign. (28) This was an explicitly feminist organization. As Butler declared, taking on the imaginary persona of a woman who fell victim to the Acts: "It is men, only men, from the first to the last that we have to do with! To please a man I did wrong at first, then I was flung about from man to man. Men police lay hands on us. By men we are examined, handled, doctored. In the hospital it is a man again who makes prayer and reads the Bible for us. We are had up before magistrates who are men, and we never get out of the hands of men till we die!" As this suggested, Butler believed there was a double standard of sexual morality, in which men were allowed to engage in sexual activity outside marriage, while women who did the same were punished, subjected to degrading treatment, and effectively imprisoned. Her solution was to preach a single standard of purity and restraint for all: women were in her view naturally devoid of sexual impulses, men had to learn to control theirs. In alliance with civil liberties groups and concerned liberal politicians,

Butler and her fellow-campaigners were harshly criticized by supporters of the Acts not least for their violation of the unwritten code that declared that respectable women should not speak of such things in public, indeed should not really know about them in the first place. As Lord Elphinstone declared, 'I look upon these women who have taken up this matter as worse than the prostitutes.' Yet the campaign in many respects shared what have become familiar as the basic Victorian assumptions about sexuality. The state regulation of vice merely in Butler's view encouraged vice. Young men were only encouraged to abandon sexual restraint by the promise of escaping infection. And the prostitutes themselves were forced

into a life of vice that was surely alien to their natural modesty as women.

Thus in the eyes of the social purity movement a prostitute or 'fallen woman' who was 'rescued' and made her way back into respectable society, perhaps via a home for reformed prostitutes, was to be welcomed back to the fold, but those who refused to repent their previous way of life were to be treated harshly. 'The fallen woman who lives off her trade', declared one social purity pamphlet, 'is a pest to society. Pity her, reform her by all means, but do not feel bound to give her liberty to ply her harmful trade any more than you give liberty to any other corrupters of society.' It was this, rather than the campaign against the Acts, that struck a chord with the respectable public, since prostitution lowered property prices and attracted crime, in the view of many local petitions and demands for the police to take action. The series of murders of prostitutes in Whitechapel in 1888 by the unknown killer known as 'Jack the Ripper', far from arousing sympathy for the victims, acted for most as a confirmation of this negative view. (29)

Butler's movement eventually secured the repeal of the Acts in 1886. But the repeal was more than a simple triumph for concerned campaigners for social justice and women's equality. It was in fact part of a wider movement of moral reform. The 1880s saw the emergence of the social purity movement, pioneered and led above all by socially and politically active women in organizations such as the Social Purity Alliance, the Moral Reform Union, the National Vigilance Association and the Association for the Improvement of Public Morals. In 1885 the Criminal Law Amendment Act raised the age of sexual consent to 16, and gave the police wide-ranging powers to close down brothels.

The Act was among other things one of the achievements of Josephine Butler's Ladies' National Association, presaging the repeal of the Contagious Diseases legislation the following year. The campaign reflected more generally the fact that women were becoming more literate, more educated; they were beginning to assert themselves and break free from the domination of the domestic paterfamilias. Employment opportunities for women in all classes were increasing again, whether as schoolteachers or as saleswomen or as secretaries. Already in 1857 divorce had for the first time become possible without the passage of a special private Act of Parliament, and in 1875 the Matrimonial Causes Act allowed legal separation for the first time, though the Act made it far easier for men to divorce their wives than the other way round. Women were serving on school boards from 1870 onwards in growing numbers, they became poor law guardians, and from the 1880s they could vote for and be elected to local district councils. This inevitably led to the creation of a National Association for Women's Suffrage, founded in 1872, the forerunner of the more radical but much less popular suffragette movement. (30) Lobbying and campaigning by a variety of active feminists secured the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, which for the first time gave women rights over the property they brought into a marriage. (31)

All of this marked the arrival of women in the Victorian public sphere. Of course this was not accepted by all, and the opponents of women's suffrage did their best to reassert the traditional view of women's place as belonging exclusively in the home. (32) (33). But for all the mockery of the cartoonists, there was no doubt that the mid-Victorian model of masculinity was now on the decline. (34) The decline was, predictably enough, accompanied by the gradual disappearance of the phenomenon I talked about earlier in this lecture, the full, patriarchal Victorian beard. Of course there were other reasons for the decline of the beard that set in around the middle of the 1880s. The end of the miasmatic theory of disease, driven out by germ theory in the 1880s, robbed beards of their medical justification as natural respirators and raised the alarming possibility that they harboured dangerous germs. The continued rise of organized sport created new standards of fitness and professionalism that beards only impeded. Physical masculinity became increasingly a matter of muscle-power. Above all, however, ideals of masculinity began to change. Both men and women increasingly sought a life outside the home from the 1880s onwards, undermining the concept of the bearded domestic patriarch. The rise and fall of the beard, therefore, followed precisely the trajectory of what we think of as the classic Victorian idea of masculinity.

Women's claim to play a part in the public sphere was based not least on a continuing and even growing belief amongst women campaigners that women were fundamentally more restrained, more responsible than men; women did not, could not, experience sexual pleasure, and a single standard of self-restraint was needed across society if the virtues of purity and probity were to triumph. The campaign against prostitution led among other things to the inclusion in the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act of an amendment, put by the ambitious Liberal politician Henry Labouchère, (35) providing for up to two years' hard labour in prison for acts of gross indecency between men. Labouchère claimed that in doing this he had been prompted by the prevalence in England's cities of male prostitution, but in effect it applied to all forms of homosexual activity between men.

It was certainly less draconian than the previous laws against buggery, which had provided the death penalty on conviction (removed in 1861), but it was much more all-encompassing. Here too ideals of masculinity played a crucial role; medical literature increasingly portrayed homosexuals as effeminate and degenerate, a threat to Victorian manliness; but the Labouchère amendment also reflected a general belief among social purity campaigners that male homosexuality was a product of the same unrestrained male lust they were trying to curb in their campaign against the double standard and the evils of the Contagious Diseases Acts. In both cases, too, public decency was invoked, along with the need to protect young people, a concern voiced particularly in the trial of Oscar Wilde in the mid-1890s. (36) As the Director of Public Prosecutions remarked in 1890, society had a duty 'to enforce the law and protect the children of respectable parents...from being made the victims of the unnatural lusts of full grown men.'

Paradoxically, of course, the criminalization of homosexuality was an important factor in creating a greater sense of sexual identity and a stronger network of subcultures amongst homosexuals. That the outlawing of homosexuality did not extend to homosexual relations between women was not, as legend would have it, because nobody in the government dared broach the subject with Queen Victoria, but in reality because of the belief in the absence of the sexual impulse among women which underlay the entire social purity campaign. It was male lust that was the object of the reformers. And male lust could of course take a variety of forms, all of them equally dangerous. Some even feared that it would destroy the British Empire, as it had destroyed the Roman Empire before. And a worse manifestation of male lust even than homosexuality was masturbation, against which there was a veritable moral panic at this time. As the social purity campaigner the Reverend J M Wilson declared: "Rome fell; other nations have fallen; and if England falls it will be this sin, and her unbelief in God, that will have been her ruin."

The former head of the CID, Sir Robert Anderson,(37) told a social purity meeting 'the harrowing story of an Eton boy, son of a colonel in the army, a brilliant lad, always head of his class, ...who had been reduced to driveling imbecility as the result of his secret sin, induced by the sight of an obscene photograph exhibited by a scoundrel whom he met in a railway train.' This was what happened when men lost self-control; and the campaign against what was always described in euphemistic terms, as it was by Sir Robert Anderson, was part of a larger campaign, once more, for male self-restraint, which in the 1890s became linked to growing fears of degeneracy amongst the men of the middle classes on whom the Empire depended.

Of course, by this time, a counter-movement was in progress, with the decadent movement, erotic publications like the Yellow Book, or the subversive wit of Oscar Wilde, challenging what I've been describing as key Victorian values. But this only signaled the complexity and diversity of late Victorian and Edwardian attitudes to sexuality. The core beliefs summed up in the Suffragettes' classic poster demand, Votes for Women and Chastity for Men continued in many ways right up to the introduction of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s. Christabel Pankhurst's pamphlet *The Great Scourge and How to End It*, advocating male abstinence as the only way to end the evil of prostitution, was perhaps not so eccentric as many historians have suggested. (38), nor either, perhaps, were the cartoonists who lampooned the suffragettes for their rejection of the more tender human emotions. (39) As Hera Cook, in her study of what she calls the 'long sexual revolution', concludes: 'Those who opposed contraception in the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth believed that it would lead women to become promiscuous and adulterous, that the institution of marriage would collapse. To a remarkable extent, it appears they were correct.'

The double standard of sexual morality has indeed more or less vanished, but this is because women's sexual conduct has become more like men's, not the other way round as the purity campaigners had hoped. It would be wrong to reduce this dramatic change mechanically to the simple effects of a technological innovation; clearly wider influences have been at work, and one of these has been religion. It is impossible to understand the power and influence of moral reform in the Victorian era without looking more closely at the nature and impact of Victorian religious belief, so that's what I shall be doing in my next lecture, in a month's time, on the 14th of March.

© Professor Richard J Evans, 2011