



Scandal: The Sexual Politics of Late Victorian Britain

Trevor Fisher

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Sexual misdemeanours in high places are not new. Today's tabloid headlines of passion and indignation at the behaviour of members of the royal and political establishment are paralleled by events of a century and more ago. The mid-Victorian period was dominated by a double standard which insisted on a rigid public respectability while condoning widespread sexual immorality by men. This hypocrisy led to extensive protests culminating in a series of highly publicized scandals in the 1880s and '90s which marked the triumph of dogmatic puritanical morality. A furious controversy raged during the 1860s and '70s over stealthy moves towards legalizing prostitution. One MP commented on the protest movement, in which early feminists such as Florence Nightingale and Josephine Butler featured prominently, 'We know how to manage any other opposition . . . but this is very awkward for us - this revolt of women. It is quite a new thing.' The general public often reacted violently to the protesters; on one occasion a mob threatened to burn down the hotel where Josephine Butler was staying. Nevertheless, the remainder of the nineteenth century saw the inexorable rise to a position of power and influence of the 'purity lobby', assisted by the major scandals of the period, which saw the downfall of Sir Charles Dilke, Charles Stewart Parnell and, most infamously of all, Oscar Wilde. This is a fascinating analysis of the politics of sexual morality in Victorian Britain, which not only provides a well-researched and radical new view of the period, but also raises many questions about the extent to which the Victorian period can be described as the rise of respectable society.

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