

Servants and masters -- the Chatterley trial

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It was one of the defining legal battles of the twentieth century. A courtroom drama which tackled issues of class, gender relations, sexuality, morality and censorship head on.

But though thousands of words have been penned debating the literary merits of the book since it appeared on our shelves, the famous obscenity trial which led to the publication of DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* has never been the subject of detailed academic scrutiny.

Now, for the first time, an academic from The University of Nottingham is delving into the archives to assess the impact of the trial on British society in the 1960s; and whether its repercussions are still being felt today.

Dr Nick Thomas of the School of History accessed resources included government material at the National archive; internal Penguin Books documents held at the University of Bristol; and archival material at The University of Nottingham's own Manuscripts and Special Collections department.

"No academic study has been done specifically on the trial," said Dr Thomas. "Books on post-war social change or obscenity have included chapters that refer to it in passing, but these rely on an incomplete, edited transcript of the trial, published by Penguin in 1961. This doesn't include information on prosecution or defence decision-making, on public reaction to the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, or any

consideration of its place within long term social change".

Dr Thomas intends to publish two articles and a book about the trial, using his archival research. These will examine the response of the public and the media to the trial and the background to the prosecution alongside its impact on society. The research has been funded by the British Academy.

"The trial is a key moment of 20th century British history and is certainly the most well-known trial of the 1960s. The archive material is also incredibly rich so it's a surprise no-one has written a book on the subject before now," he added.

"In terms of class, gender and sexuality issues, the 1960s is often presented as a time of rapid change in attitudes and behaviour. It is all too often presented either as the best of times or the worst of times and the 'permissive society' that supposedly emerged is regularly blamed for the social problems of subsequent decades. Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair have all blamed the 1960s for real or perceived problems such as rising crime, lack of social cohesion, or the replacement of shared values and a sense of community with more permissive attitudes. The Lady Chatterley trial has sometimes been blamed as the starting point for this process and so provides an excellent window onto the period as a result."

The research has also highlighted the disparity between the beliefs and wants of the majority compared with those of the privileged few.

"The potential ready availability of Lady Chatterley was one of the central concerns for the prosecutors. Before Penguin introduced affordable paperbacks to the book market in the 1930s, books could cost the equivalent to several weeks or even months' salary for the average working man or woman. Hardback books were only really available to

middle and upper class gentlemen. With the average skilled working man earning about £12 a week in 1960, Penguin's plan to publish the previously banned *Lady Chatterley's Lover* at 3s/6d meant the book would be available to anyone with a few bob to spare. With Lawrence's use of Anglo-Saxon expletives, the explicit portrayal of sex and, of course, the fact that Lady Chatterley not only commits adultery, but that this was with one of her husband's servants, the prosecution and the trial judge were horrified at the prospect of the hoi polloi getting hold of the book.

"What emerges from the archival sources is that a majority of ordinary people felt that they should be allowed to decide on the book for themselves. Nonetheless, there was a vocal minority who were desperate to prevent the publication of the book and outraged at the potential impact upon morals when the jury found in Penguin's favour," said Dr Thomas. "The project therefore raises questions about the way in which popular opinion evolved."

Source: University of Nottingham

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