TAKING CARE OF MEN
Sexual Politics in the
Public Mind

The idea of the sensitive, post-feminist ‘new man’ has received great attention. This book sets out to determine how much of the hype is based on fact, and why such images have proliferated. McMahon focuses on the pivotal issue of men’s relationship to the vital daily work of caring for people – both physically and emotionally – revealing much confusion about the extent and the interpretation of change. Using statistical data, as well as interview transcripts and media analysis, McMahon draws insightful distinctions between pleasure and performance, assistance and responsibility, gendered personality and gendered jobs, and – underlying all – between consumption and production. Incorporating social theory, psychology and popular culture, this book argues that the recent social conversation about men largely avoids the vital political point that men’s material interests provide a major motivation for resistance to pro-equity change.

After an earlier career in physics and computer science, Anthony McMahon has since lectured in sociology at Deakin and Monash Universities, developing one of the first Australian university sociology courses on men. He has published articles in journals such as Theory & Society and the Journal of Australian Studies, and has contributed to edited collections and numerous conferences. This is his first book.
To B.E.
TAKING CARE OF MEN

Sexual Politics in the Public Mind

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Preface

Since the advent of second-wave feminism, sexual-political issues about men have come onto the public agenda. From some quarters we hear optimistic reports about the extent of change in men’s lives, and even those who find actual change to be slow are inclined to stress the change in public rhetoric – ‘at least we are talking about it’. But what are we saying?

I wrote this book because I felt something vital was missing from most discussions about men and social change: a serious recognition of the central role men’s material interests play in their motivation to defend the gendered status quo. While at one level ‘everyone knows’ that men still benefit from various privileges, what initially surprised me as I surveyed the extensive public debate about men and change was the way this point is systematically obscured or marginalised in both popular and academic discussion. Slowly, though, surprise turned to understanding – after all, if the social conversation about men is blandly apolitical this is itself in the interests of men.

My analysis ranges broadly over social and psychological theory, feminist theory (especially the type most popular with men), empirical social science, the pop-sociology and pop-psychology of popular experts and media pundits, popular culture and popular ideologies. This is not quite such a huge and unmanageable range as might first appear, since social theory often turns out to be not very different from popular ideology. Perhaps this is particularly true in the case of gender, where tough truths about the social world seem to be particularly unpalatable. There is much at stake.

I have chosen one area of social life for detailed analysis – the vital routine daily work of physical and emotional care for human beings. My personal history has led me, since childhood, to be profoundly struck by
the arbitrariness and injustice of the ‘sexual division of domestic labour’, to use the seemingly dull but highly suggestive jargon of sociology – not that sociology has always followed the logic of the language of labour as far as it should. However, the proper application of the materialist paradigm of labour to include the daily work of caring for people yields, I believe, a valuable new way of thinking about men’s situation and men’s interests in the gender order. In particular, it clarifies the crucial point that men constitute a social, not a biological, category, one based upon the appropriation of love.

This book therefore belongs to a genre which has been out of favour in the last two decades – the materialist political critique of ideology – though there are signs that this situation is changing and that it will again be intellectually respectable to interrogate systems of ideas in terms of the interests they serve. My principal conclusion is that just as women continue, on the whole, to take care of men body and soul, so does the new rhetoric about men and change. The cultural and political imperative to take care of men appears to remain strong.