



The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York (Historical Studies of Urban America)

Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, American Antiquarian Society

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Obscene, libidinous, loathsome, lascivious. Those were just some of the ways critics described the nineteenth-century weeklies that covered and publicized New York City's extensive sexual underworld. Publications like the *Flash* and the *Whip*—distinguished by a captivating brew of lowbrow humor and titillating gossip about prostitutes, theater denizens, and sporting events—were not the sort generally bound in leather for future reference, and despite their popularity with an enthusiastic readership, they quickly receded into almost complete obscurity. Recently, though, two sizable collections of these papers have resurfaced, and in *The Flash Press* three renowned scholars provide a landmark study of their significance as well as a wide selection of their ribald articles and illustrations.

Including short tales of urban life, editorials on prostitution, and moralizing rants against homosexuality, these selections epitomize a distinct form of urban journalism. Here, in addition to providing a thorough overview of this colorful reportage, its editors, and its audience, the authors examine nineteenth-century ideas of sexuality and freedom that mixed Tom Paine's republicanism with elements of the Marquis de Sade's sexual ideology. They also trace the evolution of censorship and obscenity law, showing how a string of legal battles ultimately led to the demise of the flash papers: editors were hauled into court, sentenced to jail for criminal obscenity and libel, and eventually pushed out of business. But not before they forever changed the debate over public sexuality and freedom of expression in America's most important city.

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