

but as an invitation – an invitation to question, to expand, and to contribute to a field that is still very much in formation. The book is a comma, in a dialogue that is ongoing, contested, and necessarily unfinished. This book will become a cornerstone in that dialogue.

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Elwin Hofman, Magaly Rodríguez García, and Pieter Vanhees (eds), *The Business of Pleasure. A History of Paid Sex in the Heart of Europe* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2024). 181 pp. ISBN 9789462704107.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52024/5sjtd428>

*The Business of Pleasure. A History of Paid Sex in the Heart of Europe* aims to tell the story of the sex trade in Belgium over nearly a thousand years, paying special attention to the voices and profiles of the women (for most part) who sold sex. The volume covers the history of prostitution: its regulation, practices and practitioners from the Middle Ages to the present. It is the English translation of the Dutch original, *Seks voor geld. Een geschiedenis van prostitutie in België*. While the English translation claims to discuss prostitution in the heart of Europe, it is still very much a Belgian history, surveying prostitution mostly in present-day Belgium, particularly in Brussels and Antwerp with an additional chapter on regulation of prostitution in Belgian Congo.

The individual contributions fit nicely together, in such a way that the volume reads more like a monograph than an edited collection. In chapter 1, Jelle Haemers describes the medieval bath houses, *stews*, and a tolerated sex trade. In chapter 2, Elwin Hofman discusses the increasingly stricter view on prostitution in the wake of the Reformation. Selling sex was banned in some cities, although the authorities had little luck or interest in enforcing it. In chapter 3, Pieter Vanhees discusses the era following the Napoleonic Wars, when French laws and a system of regulated prostitution with frequent medicinal checks were introduced to prohibit the spread of disease. Chapter 4 by Amandine Lauro discusses the regulation, and in part creation, of prostitution in Belgian Congo. Chapter 5 returns to mainland Belgium where Magaly Rodriguez Garcia describes increasing concerns with the sex trade, leading to an ineffectual abolition in 1948; and chapter 6

by Maarten and Ilias Loopmans discusses how local authorities took initiatives towards new regulations of the trade, culminating in legalization in 2022. The last chapter consists of an interview with activist Sonia Verstappen on her career as a sex worker in Brussels and Antwerp.

Throughout the ambitious timespan and diversity of regulation and practices, the volume does a great job at showing continuities as well: how policy and public opinion of the sex trade has gone through pendulum swings between toleration, regulation, and abolition. While the editors argue against the notion of prostitution being the world's oldest profession, one can at least say that there are great similarities between, say, medieval prostitution and the twentieth-century sex trade: toleration of an industry that is technically outlawed.

The ambition to bring forth the marginalized voices of those engaging in prostitution results in a detailed, entertaining, and profoundly empathetic reading of the sex trade in Belgium. However, while concerns of trafficking and abuse are frequently mentioned throughout the volume, they are never really taken seriously as common experiences for women in the sex trade. The *White slave trade affair* and other concerns raised by the United Kingdom, the League of Nations, or feminist activists are downplayed or dismissed. In the concluding interview with sex worker activist Sonia Verstappen, who fascinatingly describes her career in the trade, and how much she loved it, she mentions in passing how prostitution for a time became dominated by Albanian women and their controlling violent pimps. While no one study can be everything on any subject, I think that not treating these matters more seriously is something of a missed opportunity to highlight the multifaceted reality of the (mostly) women selling sex.

While the volume does a great job in describing the practices of prostitution and its response to regulation, the overarching structure of the study remains unclear. When prostitution was outlawed, when it was legal, how it was regulated, and the differences between local and national mandates and regulation are not clear. Maybe it does not need to be for someone native to Belgium, but for a wider audience, it would certainly have been helpful.

Despite these objections, the volume offers a delightful read, especially for someone coming to Belgium from abroad. Coming from Sweden, while visiting Antwerp for the past year, I have frequently been surprised by the tolerant view of prostitution exhibited by many Antwerpians. The tightly regulated Red-Light District in its current

form around the Schipperskwartier almost seems to be a point of pride for many of the city's inhabitants. In that way this volume is very much a Belgian history of prostitution. It offers a great introduction and overview of the sex trade, a social history of its practitioners, and a pleasurable read.

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Kristian Mennen, *Natuurbeschermers. Een politieke geschiedenis van de natuurbeschermingsbeweging (1930-1960)* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2025). 317 pp. ISBN 9789464551587.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52024/7x9g1r6o>

This 317-page book, including notes, bibliography, and images, is a reference work for scholars and practitioners concerned with Dutch environmental and conservation law and organizations in the interwar and early postwar period. It is highly detailed and follows recognized key figures and institutions in Dutch conservation.

The content is divided into four parts, each consisting of six to nine chapters. The chapters are structured as relatively concise units, some of vignette length. Part One examines the various organizations that addressed Dutch landscapes, environments, and animals around 1930, ranging from amateur biologists to provincial organizations such as Het Zeeuwse Landschap, It Fryske Gea, Limburgs and Utrechts Landschap. It also analyzes the central role played by Natuurmonumenten (the Society for the Preservation of Nature in the Netherlands). In addition, it considers the question of success in the selected period, during which there was relatively limited official policy between the Bird Act of 1912 and the Nature Conservation Act of 1967. Mennen argues that it is precisely this policy gap that makes the period historically significant.

Part Two focuses on the crisis years of the 1930s and the tensions between state measures for creating employment and their associated construction programs, on the one hand, and nature and forest conservation interests, on the other. It also discusses the establishment of the Wevers Commission in 1929 as an official advisory body tasked with providing scientifically grounded guidance to the government on environmental development. This included matters of cultivation, reclamation, exploitation, and the conservation of natural monuments.