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**Living with Isherwood**

**Christopher Isherwood as a pioneer in the world of male-male relationships "on the wrong side of the law"**

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"Don is very conscious of the existence of this “old black book,” as he calls it. He’s sure it’s full of criticism of him. I tell him, well, when I die, all he has to do is burn it."

Don Bachardy was both wrong and right about that “old black book”, his partner Christopher Isherwood’s journal. It is not a catalogue of carpings. It is not vengeful or – looked at overall – bitter. But it has its bitter moments, since it describes a difficult ménage. One is tempted, coming upon it for the first time, to be critical of Bachardy: why must he be so sensitive? Why is he always flying off the handle? Why should he, a young artist at the start of his career, have the nerve to suggest to the older, celebrated novelist that he should move out of their shared home for a while, in order to give Bachardy some space? Didn’t he know, when he took up with Isherwood, what he was letting himself in for?

Very quickly, though, one is reminded of two things. The first is that all this information is coming to us from one source, from this subtle and self-lacerating, but by no means innocent, novelist. If anyone was in a position to rig the evidence in a bid for sympathy, it would have been Isherwood. And what was he writing this journal for? As a memorial to his tortured self, to be read, after his death, first by his lover, and thereafter by the public. Look at the monstrous burden he lays on Bachardy in the passage quoted above. He offers him, or seems to offer him, the right to burn the journal. Is he serious about this? Is the fate of the “old black book” a matter of indifference to him? Or is he daring the young man to destroy something infinitely precious? What is his tone of voice here? Angry, mocking, goading by any chance? Is he not saying: you may destroy my portrait of you, but at what price? Isn’t there something cruel at work here? And might there not have been something cruel at work at other times in their unequal relationship, something the reader misses because it has been cleverly concealed?

The second point that strikes me most forcefully is that this business of two men living together and appearing socially as partners had, at the time that Isherwood and Bachardy set up home, a comparatively short history. Women were more experienced at this kind of thing. The Ladies of Llangollen established their household in 1780, and lived together, internationally famous and unmolested by the law, for fifty years. We know from the extraordinary evidence of Anne Lister, who visited them towards the end of their lives, that other women of the period did indeed ask themselves about the physical nature of the Ladies’ relationship, and were capable of supposing that it must have had some sexual expression.

Women lived together on all sorts of terms, with varying degrees of opacity. But how many male-male couples can one think of, before the twentieth century, who had some version of a marriage? The 1890s seem to have seen the beginning of the bold experiment. The two artists Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts lived together in Chelsea. The socialist Edward Carpenter and his friend George Merrill in Derbyshire, and the American Ned Warren (owner of the Warren Cup, now in the British Museum) and John Marshall in their Sussex home, stand out as articulate pioneers in an age more likely to be dominated by fear and denial.

The writers and musicians of the 1930s are associated in our minds with some famous pairings: Auden and Kallman, Isherwood and Bachardy, Britten and Pears. But the terms and conditions under which such men came together as publicly acknowledged partners varied widely. As late as 1960 (as the helpful glossary to the latest volume of Isherwood’s diaries reminds us) Angus Wilson’s lover, Tony Garrett, a probation officer, was asked by his employers to move out of Wilson’s cottage “to a separate residence at least 40 miles distant”. He chose to refuse and thereby sacrificed his career, preferring to work for Wilson instead as “secretary, typist, research assistant, driver and photographer”. In other cases, the term secretary had been a euphemism. Here it covers a defiant choice.

Living on the wrong side of the law, in Britain or America, or in the various European countries that proved hospitable to them, homosexual men could hardly be expected to hold the State and its admonishments in very high regard, except as a danger to their well-being. On ethical matters that might provoke intelligent differences of opinion today, notably the proper age of consent, they probably had very little to say. If everything they did was illegal, why should they strain to determine what was and should be illegal? Auden at twenty-six was in love with a boy of fourteen and a half, and wrote “Lay your sleeping head, my love” out of the experience. Undoubtedly he would have thought of the situation as dangerous. But does he show any evidence of finding it unethical?

Isherwood, in A Single Man (1964), has his hero George go to the gym where, finding a boy of twelve or thirteen beginning his sit-ups, he strips off his T-shirt on an impulse and joins him. Man and boy work out, side by side, and come to a panting conclusion together. “How delightful it is to be here”, comments the narrator. “If only one could spend one’s entire life in this state of easygoing physical democracy . . . . The youngest kids sit innocently naked beside sixty- and seventy-year-olds in the steam room, and they call each other by their first names.” It really is a pederastic dream – not sex as such, but man-boy intimacy elevated to an ideal. No doubt it might disturb an editor today, but it appears that in 1964 there was more worry about an evocation, elsewhere in the novel, of solitary masturbation. The whole of A Single Man was going to be controversial anyway, and perhaps Isherwood and his editors took the view that you might as well be hanged for a lamb as for a sheep.

Isherwood was capable of alarming his friends with his recklessness, not least when, in 1953, he took up with the young Don Bachardy, who, though eighteen, looked much younger. At forty-eight, Isherwood was actually older than his lover’s father. So the unequal relationship was off-balance from the start, and there is no question at all of demanding, with the hindsight of more than half a century, that the young Bachardy “knew what he was letting himself in for”. He hadn’t even yet left home.

Besides, it is very far from clear to me what he was letting himself in for, or what Isherwood might have anticipated at best. We tend often to think of domestic homosexual relationships today as civil unions that are striving in the direction of marriages. Our world is imperfect, we think, if our gay liaisons cannot enjoy the same legal status as traditional marriages. What is more, we have an increasing tendency to look to monogamy as the norm: it goes with the legal model – shared property and pension rights, the adoption of children and so forth. Gay life since AIDS has become increasingly bourgeois and – whether we allow the word or not – heteronormative.

But the world Isherwood describes, most vividly in all its physical intimacy, in The Lost Years – that is the 1940s and early 50s – though it is full of men falling for each other and becoming in some sense couples, seems very short indeed on truly monogamous relationships. The gay life was not like that. It is true that Auden, on taking up with Chester Kallman, considered himself married to the man, bound by some kind of vow. In due course, Kallman certainly took a different view, but the view he took – that he was free, within their relationship, to have as much sex elsewhere as he pleased – was absolutely typical of the gay milieu of the day.

It was Isherwood’s view too, time after time, and we see him in The Lost Years enjoying a long-term relationship with Bill Caskey at the same time as profiting from every opportunity for extracurricular activity: casual, all of it, whether with friends or with strangers, furtively or exhibitionistically, on the beach or in the back of the car. When Britten and Pears come to California in 1949, Isherwood asks Britten if he ever has sex with other people than Pears. “Ben said no, he was faithful to Peter, adding, ‘I still feel the old charm.’” Isherwood throws a party, which, however wasn’t an unqualified success.

"The house was crammed with young men who were most of them fairly attractive. They danced together or went upstairs and necked. When invited, many of them had told Christopher that they were eager to meet the guests of honor, Britten and Pears – but, having done so, they quickly lost interest in them. In this gay setting, where celebrity snobbery was replaced by sex snobbery, Ben and Peter were just a pair of faded limey queens, who were, furthermore, too shy and too solidly mated to join in the general kissing and cuddling. The party wasn’t really for them, although they politely pretended to believe it was."

The pair of faded limey heteronormative queens might well be closer to us today than Isherwood filling his house with “mostly fairly attractive young men” in the hopes of providing partners for his “too solidly mated” friends.

If the sexual world of Isherwood seems in some ways dated, that is partly because some of its assumptions have indeed dated. It would be one thing, perhaps, to propose sexual freedom within a relationship, as a way of asserting that the gay man belongs to bohemia rather than to the bourgeoisie (although it seems hard to insist that every gay man should live by the laws of bohemia). But supposing, buried somewhere in the psychology of this phase of a social revolution, there was a pessimistic assumption about male sexuality – an assumption that the homosexual male would be promiscuous because he couldn’t be otherwise. And suppose this pessimism derived from a source (religious, psychiatric, conventional) which was fundamentally anti-gay, and which had an interest in warning men off what it conceived as a lifestyle choice: don’t go down that road, sonny, or you will end up sad and alone. Then we might just concede that the whole matter of gay promiscuity deserved a critical look.

The pioneers of long-term male-male liaisons lived in a world that was quite without statutes or codes (partners, for instance, could claim no legal rights), and notably short on the sort of informal case law, the accumulated folk wisdom that guided so many a marriage. They could not, as it were, run home to mother for advice, and expect a wise old fireside matriarch, her head full of proverbs and precedents, plant lore and potions, to send them back, with courage renewed, to face whatever they dreaded facing. And as for literature, one has only to think how rich the tradition is that warns the old man what to expect from a young wife, and how little has been set down for the guidance of older men making home with young boyfriends.

Everything has changed so fast. A single lifetime witnessed a gay world transformed. E. M. Forster’s recent biographer, Wendy Moffat, reminds us that Forster was sixteen at the time that Oscar Wilde went to prison, and that he died the year after the Stonewall riots. Samuel Steward, the pornographer and tattoo artist, the subject of Justin Spring’s tour de force, Secret Historian, published last year, was able, as a young man (though it cannot have been that much fun), to seduce Lord Alfred Douglas. He lived to see his world devastated by AIDS. He left an account of every sexual encounter he had had, together with a comprehensive documentation of the gay underworld as he knew it – a world which had several points of contact with Isherwood’s. One thinks of the photographer George Platt Lynes, a friend to both men, at a loss what to do with his archive of nude photographs (which would have been illegal to sell or possess, if judged obscene), and eventually deciding to leave them to the Kinsey Institute.

Not that this kind of research establishment was inevitably immune from police investigation or harassment. Evelyn Hooker, whose research into the lives of homosexuals persuaded her that homosexuality was a normal condition (Isherwood had said to her once, “Evelyn, you think you’re going to discover a secret. All you’ll discover is a nature” – a remark which she said had greatly inspired her), became embroiled, in 1961, in a court case concerning a woman who had undergone an abortion. Hooker believed that the police were pressuring her because of the nature of her research. And so, Katherine Bucknell tells us in her introduction to The Sixties, “Anxiety led her to remove all personally identifying data from her notes and records, a task which took her and her secretary nearly a year”.

Isherwood’s journals belong to this same period, and the present volume covers the last decade of homosexuality’s illegality in the United States. His work as a whole offers a remarkable testimony, over several volumes of fiction and non-fiction, genres which Isherwood interwove with characteristic unnerving effect (as when, in Christopher and his Kind and The Lost Years, he enforces an irritating distinction between the I of the present author and the third-person Christopher of past decades). The self-recording angel in him seems to become angrier and angrier over the years. And this anger reminds one of gay men of a certain generation. It is not a wholly admirable indignation, since it includes an abiding resentment against women in general: the world would be just fine if it hadn’t been spoilt by women, or “fish” as they were known in the old queer argot.

And then there was this deficient sense in Isherwood that heterosexuality had anything much to be said for it. After a party at which there were not enough martinis: “I don’t think heterosexual parties are workable, anyhow, just as conversation groups. If men and women mix, they should dance and flirt; they have very little to say to each other. An unmixed group of men or women would have been far livelier”. And in the next paragraph:

"Sure, I am prejudiced, but I feel always more strongly how ignoble marriage usually is. How it drags down and shackles and degrades a young man like Henri [Coulette, American poet], who is really sweet and bright and full of quiet but powerful passion. The squalid little shop, the little business premises, you have to open, and the deadly social pattern which is then imposed on you – of dragging some dowdy little frump of a woman all around with you, wherever you go, for the next forty years. Not to mention the kids. It is a miserable compromise for the man, and he is apt to punish the woman for having blackmailed him into it.

Must read Strindberg on this subject . . . ."

But of course reading Strindberg on the subject was not going to help him with his own situation: facing (rather early and obsessively, considering his normally good health) the prospect of approaching death, aware of his loss of looks and figure, and very much conscious that his much younger partner was having a good time away from home.

To feel that heterosexual marriage was ignoble was one thing. But to present marriage as ignoble only from the point of view of the man makes Isherwood look ridiculously faggy. That there was a deep-rooted problem with women is clear, in The Lost Years, from the description of “Christopher’s” (that is, his former self’s) first meeting with Georgia O’Keeffe:

"He admired her – even liked her at times – but they were natural enemies from the moment they met. Maybe Georgia would have been the natural enemy of any man who was escorting Peggy [Kiskadden, American socialite], and maybe the knowledge that Christopher was queer merely added contempt to her hostility. I’m not saying that Georgia was a dyke – I mean, yes, sure she was, but that wasn’t the point about her. She was first and foremost an archfeminist, a pioneer women’s libber."

The assumption here, that queers and dykes must be enemies, is puzzling. What exactly are we supposed to be fighting over?

Auden appears in the diaries in 1967, lamenting that Benjamin Britten was “the only friend he had ever lost” – something I remember him saying again, with real regret.

"After we had had a lot of drinks, he said that Chester and Don and I were his only real friends – despite the fact that he knows so many people. He shed tears as he said this, which was curious rather than touching, because he recovered himself so quickly and because he apologized to me next morning, as I was driving him to the airport, for making a scene. Surely, I couldn’t help thinking, a friend is hardly a friend if you can’t show emotion in his presence? Still, I believe in his emotion and in his loneliness, and I am indeed very very fond of him, and I think he is not only deeply affectionate but truly lovable and a great man."

Auden was lonely, no doubt, because by now he was only spending half the year with Kallman, and because there was too much in their relationship that he had to pretend not to see. If you include them, as I do, among the pioneers of gay partnerships, you have also to admit that there are happier examples to follow.

But how that happiness is to be measured, and how it can be deduced from written evidence, is a matter of great mystery. The figure of Thom Gunn, who appears in these pages as “one of the strongest people I’ve met for a long time”, is associated both with the Californian pursuit of sexual freedom, and with a domestic partnership which seems to have lasted from college days throughout the whole of his adult life. Towards the end, in poems such as “The Hug” and “Rapallo”, Gunn gives us the impression that he and his friend enjoyed something of great value, and that they were able to reconcile the erotic desire to wander with the yearning for a companionable home.

But what do I know? I know only what I read. I know what Gunn, the happier writer, tells me in those beautiful late poems, and what Isherwood sets out in these capacious journals, angry and ugly though they sometimes are.

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THE SIXTIES   
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