

Part II

Queer Families

Introduction

In 2009 a documentary film – *Uncle Denis* – was screened for an event at the South Bank Centre to mark the 100th birthday of writer, raconteur, film critic and notorious homosexual Quentin Crisp. His great nephew Adrian Goycoolea had edited interviews with home movie footage to show a different side of Crisp to the one he himself presented in his published writing and interviews.¹ Crisp is shown by Goycoolea embedded in family life – at weddings and other family events. The film was an opportunity for him to explore the ‘troubled position’ that his great uncle held within the family.

I began by looking through my old family photographs and home movies. I then contacted my extended family and asked them to rummage through their personal memories of Quentin with me. I discovered that like any gay man Quentin had a complicated relationship with notions of the nuclear family. He felt excluded from it yet at the same time, given who he is, Quentin has always held a privileged place in our family narrative. This tension played out in various ways throughout his life and this film is my attempt to reconcile his position within our family structure together with his wider significance in society.²

The youngest of four children, Denis Pratt was brought up in suburban Sutton to the south of London. After school he moved to central London – studying journalism and then art and taking a new name for ‘my new self’.³ It was an opportunity to start again at one remove from his family – and that ‘stately homo’, the lone, brave ‘naked civil servant’



Figure 11 Adrian Goycoolea (aged 11) with his Great Uncle Denis (Quentin Crisp) in 1989

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is the image that stuck. 'He had a style', observed his niece, 'that he was all alone in the world; the family spoilt that image'.⁴ Yet he is there in the family albums, and was the 'closest thing to a grandfather' Goycoolea had.⁵ It was for his generation in particular that this accommodation occurred. Crisp's mother and siblings had been upset by the way they and their home life were depicted in Crisp's autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968) and the film adaptation starring John Hurt that followed in 1975. His nieces, nephews and great nieces and great nephews meanwhile 'enjoyed him', signalling shifting attitudes and also a permissiveness that can come with more distant bonds and more attenuated affections. Crisp himself felt they were interested in him because of his notoriety; this was perhaps the only way he could account for it. Goycoolea, on the other hand, writes that: 'at least for my and my sister's part I can say that this is most definitely not true. We enjoyed him, not his notoriety'.⁶ *Uncle Denis* nuances Crisp's self-presentation and also broader representations which suggest a divorce of queer lives from family lives.

Goycoolea's account of his great uncle and in this section my explorations of George Ives, Joe Ackerley, and, in the epilogue, of gay adopter Peter McGraith, are not attempts simplistically to re-forge a link between queer men and their relatives as if sexuality and an awareness of it did not matter. Instead I look at the attachment to and disavowal of family for these men, and at the way families, family homes, the language of family, and familial ways of thinking and relating weave through their testimony and experience. They had to be self-conscious about how they interacted with their families emotionally and in practical everyday terms. This was because of what was culturally expected of family relationships, because of the (shifting) social positioning of queer men, and because of the distance that was presumed to lie between such men and their families. The omission of family from the history of homosexuality matters, historian Deborah Cohen argues, because 'whether your family cast you off or not (or something in between) could make a great deal of difference in the life of an individual'.⁷ The potency of family relationships is tangible in the way the men I examine organized their own households, in the way they experienced and conceptualised their connections with other people, and in the way they thought about their pasts and futures. Analysing this interaction suggests that family was malleable enough, conceptually and practically, to accommodate – sometimes uneasily, sometimes more comfortably – the queer difference of uncles, fathers, brothers, sons, and nephews. The analysis also suggests a muddling through in those relationships and in the everyday which is less about an ideal of what families should or should not be like, and more to do with the immediacy of the people involved and with the desire for intimacy, for reassurance, and for some form of progeny or legacy.

The main part of this section is concerned with Ives and Ackerley, and so contextually with the ideas of family, family homes and of homosexuality during the century from 1867 (the year of Ives' birth) to 1967 (the year of Ackerley's death). The epilogue shows how debate about the relationship of gay men to family escalated from the 1970s and often pivoted on the question of parenthood – reconnecting with some late nineteenth-century commentary which I'll say more about in this introduction. The possibility of parenthood has been part of a significant recent reorientation of the way gay men have been seen to interact with and to be part of families (and even though queer men had of course been parents before). Through my brief final case study of McGraith, however, I'll suggest at least some continuity with Ives and Ackerley's earlier experience in terms of the self-conscious negotiation

of family practically and conceptually – and also a parallel (and related) eagerness to preserve a distinctive lifestyle and sense of queer difference.

‘Exiles from Kin’?

As the notion of a distinctive inverted character was postulated in the late nineteenth century, so the seeds of a more decisive divorce of homosexual from heterosexual, and homosexual from family were sown.⁸ Sexology and psychoanalysis both suggested that the invert or homosexual was the product of family – through inheritance or deviations in Sigmund Freud’s Oedipal triangle. In adulthood, though, the invert would ideally shun fatherhood and with it the conventions of respectable family life. It was not possible, wrote sexologist Havelock Ellis in 1897, ‘to view with satisfaction the prospects of inverts begetting or bearing children’:

Often, no doubt, the children turn out fairly well, but for the most part they bear witness that they belong to a neurotic and failing stock. Sometimes, indeed, the tendency to sexual inversion in eccentric and neurotic families seems merely to be Nature’s merciful method of winding up a concern which, from her point of view, has ceased to be profitable.⁹

Other turn-of-the-century sexologists – Richard von Krafft-Ebing, August Forel, Charles Féré and Iwan Bloch – agreed. Bloch claimed that ‘among homosexuals the impulse towards the preservation of the species is almost entirely wanting – not more than 3 per cent have the wish to possess children’.¹⁰ Forel even argued that homosexuals should be allowed to embark on same-sex marriage as a means of staving off the possibility of reproductive sex.¹¹ In this way the homosexual would die out and become a curiosity of the past¹² – ‘unprofitable’ (in Ellis’ telling phrase; note too Bloch’s notion of ‘possess[ing]’ children) in a capitalist economic system which Frederick Engels had recently shown was dependent on a particular form of family and particular gendered roles within it.¹³ Ironically, this very system and the expansion in the number of wage earners had enabled more men to live away from their families and in part facilitated the emergence of an autonomous (middle-class) homosexual identity. If the homosexual as a type was unprofitable in that culture in eugenic terms he was also arguably a product of it.¹⁴

In a different vein but at around the same time as the sexologists, Edward Carpenter, Oscar Wilde, Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts

gestured to a different mode of reproduction and an artistic, philosophical and spiritual queer genealogy extending from Plato and David and Jonathan, through Michelangelo and Shakespeare, to these men themselves and then on into the future.¹⁵ Bloch was again dismissive:

The greatest spiritual values we owe to heterosexuals, not to homosexuals. Moreover, reproduction first renders possible the preservation and permanence of new spiritual values. [...] Spiritual values exist only in respect of the future, that they only attain their true significance in [...] the succession of the generations, and that they are, therefore, eternally dependent upon heterosexual love as the intermediary by which this continuity is produced.

Homosexuals were 'permanently limited to their own ego' and were 'in their innermost nature dysteleological and anti-evolutionistic'.¹⁶ Those values touted by queer artists, writers and thinkers were secondary to the evolutionary process as Bloch envisaged it. Without a 'proper' investment in family they could apparently not contribute culturally either.

Such men were seen by some actively to threaten English society and culture. In 1909 M.D. O'Brien attacked Carpenter for the threat he posed to 'private property, private homes, and private families' through his politics and his advocacy of 'homogenic love'. The 'socialist and anti-private property principle of unexclusiveness', he wrote, 'strikes inevitably at the monogamic union, without which the separate private family, composed of children who have [...] the same father and mother, cannot in the very nature exist'.¹⁷ O'Brien signalled the anarchic potential of a queerer social organisation. He saw it in paranoid fashion radically disrupting the capitalist system and fracturing a culture and society which put home and family at the centre in terms of national and imperial well-being. Carpenter was a threat because he had set up home outside this system with a male partner with whom there was no legal contract and no children. Lacking this legitimising framework, it could not be a 'real' home – a version in a different key of the *faux* domesticity, fake marriages and mock birthing rituals that took place in the Molly Houses of eighteenth and early nineteenth century London (and of which readers of Iwan Bloch's *Sexual Life of England: Past and Present* were reminded in 1908).¹⁸

While we can pinpoint concern about the relationship of the homosexual to family in the first half of the twentieth century, however, this debate was not far reaching. Sexology was initially of minority interest in Britain, Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* was banned,¹⁹ and O'Brien's critique

of Carpenter appeared in a privately printed pamphlet. Homosexuality was not commonly pitched against family at this time because it was not yet broadly used to denote a clearly separate and distinct category which existed in opposition to a larger and reproductive heterosexual grouping. Though various 'types' might have been recognisable on London's streets, and certain men – Ives and Ackerley amongst them – used the sexological labels for themselves, many men who had sex with other men did not comprehend their desires in these terms or see them as incompatible with home, marriage and children (something we will see with various of Ives and Ackerley's lovers). Sexology and psychoanalysis were nevertheless important because they did have some currency for the men I discuss, they also coded the relationship between homosexuality and family and sewed important seeds in this respect – seeds which took root after the Second World War when hetero/homo, gay/straight understandings of sexuality gained more general currency and family was imagined being more radically dissociated from homosexuality.²⁰ Though heterosexual reproductive family life was certainly idealised before the 1950s, it was not so homogenous (in terms of the number of children, for example) nor so commonly defined against an unfamiliar and undomesticated queer menace as it was during and after that decade.²¹

Lived experiences of family were moreover as mutable as those of sexuality and sexual identity. While the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the rise of the middle-class domestic family unit headed by the male breadwinner and with the conjugal couple at its core, the boundaries of such families were porous and extended outwards.²² In *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1857) – Dinah Craik's popular novel modelling and espousing domestic, familial and middle-class propriety – the conjugal couple Ursula and John watch over their growing family with a third live-in adult: the eponymous hero's besotted lifelong invalid friend Phineas. Such an arrangement was clearly conceptually compatible with developing ideals of the middle-class home and family for Craik, and is emblematic of 'a more broadly based topography of kinship' in the past than we tend to assume.²³ This was not least because families were so variable in size and composition compared to the period from roughly the 1930s when most married couples began to limit themselves to just two children,²⁴ and when more and more parents were surviving into old age. In the earlier context when most people died before they were 60,²⁵ children were commonly bought up by one parent, by other family members, or in informal adoption arrangements (adoption was not formalised by the state until 1926).²⁶ This earlier expansive conception

of family could potentially accommodate men like Phineas in avuncular, care-giving roles.²⁷ His single state was then and for the first half of the twentieth century moreover a very common if not quite majority experience – though the denomination often feels inappropriate given the intense friendships, attachments and ongoing relationships many nominally single people had.²⁸ Family was thus an uncertain and changeable entity which yet in its idealised and lived forms couched the way people (single or married) were seen and also saw themselves. This was true for everyone. For those with queer desires and identities there was, we will see, additional and self-conscious work to do in negotiating family and family relationships.