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Lost Years

A MEMOIR 1945 - 1951

Christopher Isherwood

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LOST YEARS

A Memoir 1945–1951

Edited and introduced by Katherine Bucknell

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Introduction

On his sixty-seventh birthday, August 26, 1971, Christopher Isherwood began to write the autobiographical memoir which is contained in this volume, about his life in California and New York and his travels abroad to England and Europe from January 1945 to May 1951. He called the work a reconstructed diary, and he intended it to recapture a lost period following World War II when he had all but abandoned his lifelong habit of keeping a diary. He based the reconstructed diary on his memories and on what he called his “day-to-day diaries,” the pocket-sized appointment books in which he regularly noted the names of people he saw on a given day and sometimes, cryptically, what they had done together.¹ He also drew on the handful of diary entries he did make during the lost years² and on letters he had written at the time (he asked for some letters to be returned to him for reference), and he consulted a few friends for their own recollections. The reconstructed diary, never completed by Isherwood but also never destroyed, is now published for the first time as *Lost Years: A Memoir 1945–1951*.

Like his earlier autobiography about the 1920s, *Lions and Shadows* (1938), *Lost Years* describes the relationships and experiences which gave inner shape to Isherwood’s life during the period it portrays, but in contrast to *Lions and Shadows*, the memoir begun in 1971 is based as closely as possible on fact. Unlike Isherwood’s other diaries, kept contemporaneously with the events they recorded, the manuscript of the reconstructed diary shows many alterations, often using white-

¹ He had lost his pocket diary for 1946, and he noted in his diary on September 2, 1971 that during the postwar period even his pocket diaries were not kept up every day.

² All of these entries have already been published in Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries Volume One 1939–1960 (D1)*, ed. Katherine Bucknell (London, 1996; New York, 1997). In the reconstructed diary, Isherwood usually calls these diaries “journals,” thereby distinguishing them from his day-to-day diaries.

out. Moreover, it is heavily annotated with Isherwood's own footnotes, which comment, correct, and elaborate on his narrative. With a scholarly precision he might have mocked when studying history at Cambridge in the 1920s, he sharply scrutinized and questioned his memories, trying to establish exactly what happened and to understand why.

Lions and Shadows had aimed to entertain and was prefaced by Isherwood's disclaimer that "it is not, in the ordinary journalistic sense of the word, an autobiography; it contains no 'revelations'; it is never 'indiscreet'; it is not even entirely 'true.'" Isherwood goes on to say, "Read it as a novel." But *Lost Years* is the second book in a major new phase—roughly the final third of his career—in which Isherwood moved away from semi-fictionalized writing towards pure autobiography. It does contain revelations; it is highly indiscreet; and it foregoes deliberate artifice in order to try to recapture actual past events. It should not be read as a novel, although its aspiration to be true is partly reflected in its effort—deeply characteristic of Isherwood—to record and account for the way in which mythological significance arises from real events. In the reconstructed diary, as elsewhere in Isherwood's work, the play of fantasy and emotion is recognized and incorporated as a dimension of real experience.

Isherwood completed *Kathleen and Frank*, his detailed historical book about his parents, in the autumn of 1970. Having spent several years in prolonged meditation upon the heterosexual bond between his parents—they shared a late-Victorian, upper-middle-class marriage which was perfectly happy until devastated by Frank Isherwood's death in World War I—he seemed to need to react by writing about the very different affinities which shaped his own life. He was no longer motivated by the spirit of rebellion that governed his youth, but certainly, at first, by a spirit of relief and lightheartedness. On Thanksgiving Day 1970, thankful that he had completed *Kathleen and Frank*, he wondered in his diary, "What shall I write next?" He considered a book about his relationship with his spiritual teacher Swami Prabhavananda—a book he would only begin half a decade later—but he knew already that such a book could not be a novel:

Surely it would be better from every point of view to do this as a factual book? Well of course there is the difficulty of being frank without being indiscreet: but that difficulty always arises in one form or another. For example, it is absolutely necessary that I

should say how, right at the start of our relationship, I told Swami I had a boyfriend (and that he replied, “try to think of him as Krishna”) because my personal approach to Vedanta was, among other things, the approach of a homosexual looking for a religion which will accept him.¹

For Isherwood, a book about his religious life, when he came to write it, would have to begin by addressing the question of his sexuality. So he went on to propose to himself that he write a book expressly about his sexuality and sketched out a plan for the reconstructed diary which he would, in fact, begin on his birthday the following August:

Then there is the fairly big chunk of diary fill-in which I might do, covering the scantily covered period between January 1, 1945 and February 1955—or maybe February 1953, when I met Don [Bachardy], because that’s the beginning of a new era. This would be quite largely a sexual record and so indiscreet as to be unpublishable. It might keep me amused, like knitting, but I should be getting on with something else as well.

The project which he compared to “knitting”—recreating the sequence and sense of his life during the late 1940s in little, unimportant stitches—did more than just keep Isherwood amused as he had at first imagined. It proved both challenging and absorbing, and for several years he attempted no other work of his own—although during the first half of the 1970s he collaborated with Don Bachardy on a television script of *Frankenstein* (1971), and on three other scripts which were never made: *The Lady from the Land of the Dead*, *The Beautiful and Damned* (both for television), and a film script of Isherwood’s novel *A Meeting by the River* (1967), which they had already successfully adapted for the stage. Moreover, Isherwood’s “knitting,” somewhat like the flow of unselfconscious, free-associative talk in psychoanalysis, evidently set his mind free to delve more directly than ever before into his private life. The very insignificance and confidentiality of the task opened new avenues to self-reflection. And so perhaps without at first realizing it, Isherwood embarked on an entirely new episode of his life’s work.

In his Thanksgiving diary entry he had gone on to ask himself whether he would ever again write fiction:

Have I given up all idea of writing another novel, then? No, not

¹ Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries 1960–1983* (unpublished), November 26, 1970.

necessarily. The problem really is as follows: The main thing I have to offer as a writer are my reactions to experience (these are my fiction or my poetry, or whatever you want to call it). Now, these reactions are more positive when I am reacting to actual experiences, than when I am reacting to imagined experiences. Yet, the actuality of the experiences does bother me, the brute facts keep tripping me up, I keep wanting to rearrange and alter the facts so as to relate them more dramatically to my reactions. Facts are never simple, they come in awkward bunches. You find yourself reacting to several different facts at one and the same time, and this is messy and unclear and undramatic. I have had this difficulty many times while writing *Kathleen and Frank*. For instance, Christopher's reactions to Kathleen are deplorably complex and therefore self-contradictory, and therefore bad drama.

On the one hand, Isherwood was restating, and perhaps rediscovering, something he had long known: that his reactions to real experience were more vivid, more intense than anything he could invent. On the other hand, he conceded that writing accurate history was a more severe discipline than writing fiction, because he could not alter the facts to conform to his artistic intention. As early as 1953 he had described in his diary his "lack of inclination to cope with a constructed, invented plot—the feeling, why not write what one experiences from day to day?" Then, in 1953, he had attributed the feeling to the fact that he had fallen in love with Don Bachardy: "Why invent—when Life is so prodigious?" And he had added, "Perhaps I'll never write another novel. . . ."¹ Yet he had gone on to write several of his best novels over the twelve or thirteen years following 1953. But eventually the fiction did stop. Isherwood wrote his last novel, *A Meeting by the River*, in 1965 and 1966; by the time it was published in 1967, he was already hard at work on *Kathleen and Frank*, which is based so closely on his parents' letters and diaries that it incorporates long passages from them, "brute facts," which he could not rearrange and which forced him to struggle with the complexity and contradiction of real life. As soon as he finished correcting the proofs of *Kathleen and Frank*, he began reconstructing the lost years of his own life, 1945 to 1951, according to a similar version of the newly established method.

In September 1973, Isherwood at last began to get on, as he had envisioned in the Thanksgiving diary entry, with "something else as well." This was to be an autobiographical book, about his life in

¹ *D1*, pp. 455–6.

America, in which he planned to tell, according to an inspiration derived from Jung, his “personal myth.”¹ It would share publicly some of his wartime diaries as well as the fruits of the “knitting” he had done in the meantime, and it would be for him a new kind of book. By late October the American autobiography began to undergo a metamorphosis, because Isherwood realized that he could not explain why he had emigrated to America without first telling about the personal crisis which had occurred when his German lover Heinz Neddermeyer had been turned away from England by an immigration official in January 1934. So he shifted the book’s focus backward to the decade of the 1930s, in order to tell the story of the events which drove him away from England in search of what he called “my sexual homeland.”² Isherwood and Heinz had been forced to wander through Europe in search of a country where they could settle together, safe from Hitler’s persecution of homosexuals and from his conscription; finally, Heinz was arrested by the Gestapo in May 1937, just inside the German border. When Isherwood at last published this autobiography as *Christopher and His Kind* in 1976, he overnight became a hero of the burgeoning gay liberation movement. The book sold faster than any other he had ever written.

Isherwood conceded in interviews and letters that he had moved beyond the brute facts in writing *Christopher and His Kind*, because he wanted it to read as a novel rather than a memoir.³ In earlier works, as the book itself makes clear, he had moved away from facts not only to heighten dramatic effect but also to avoid writing about his homosexuality. But in *Christopher and His Kind* he no longer wished to avoid writing about his homosexuality; on the contrary he wished to tell about it in detail. This new impulse, to reveal rather than to conceal, is a continuation of the impulse according to which he had begun the reconstructed diary in 1971 (indeed, *Christopher and His Kind* incorporates whole passages from the reconstructed diary), and Isherwood’s ability in the 1976 autobiography to deal forthrightly with his sexuality, as the underpinning for the trajectory of his life, grew directly out of the confidential and, as it had once seemed, insignificant work he had already done recapturing his postwar life from 1945 to 1951. *Christopher and His Kind* was a relatively shocking book, even as late as 1976. The reconstructed diary is far more

¹ Diaries 1960–1983, September 14, 1973.

² Diaries 1960–1983, October 29, 1973.

³ Interview with W. I. Scobie and letter to Isherwood’s U.K. publisher (at Methuen) quoted in Brian Finney, *Christopher Isherwood: A Critical Biography* (London, 1979), p. 282.

shocking; even now, some passages have been altered or removed to protect the privacy of a few of Isherwood's friends and acquaintances who are still alive.

Isherwood's reconstructed diary is sexually explicit partly because, for the first time ever, it could be. In 1971, seven years after the publication of his assertively homosexual novel *A Single Man* (1964), two years after the Stonewall riot in New York, and well into the cultural and sexual revolution spawned during the 1960s, he was comfortable committing to paper (though not necessarily for publication) details of personal relationships such as he would for years previously either never have written down or otherwise felt compelled to destroy. Since the end of the 1950s, censorship laws in the United States had been gradually relaxed; court decisions had increasingly required the post office to deliver magazines formerly ruled obscene and had permitted publication and sale of books that might once have attracted a ban. Even the Hollywood Code, governing censorship of films, gave way during the 1960s. Although some of the sex acts which Isherwood describes in the reconstructed diary were still widely illegal, he could without much risk of penalty record the true habits and attitudes of the homosexual milieu in which he had long lived in semi-secrecy.

Lost Years, the reconstructed diary which began for Isherwood as a task of personal recollection and amusement, can now be seen to have a more general significance as a work of social history. For it aimed to recapture the mood and behavior of a little recognized group which was soon to make itself known to the popular consciousness. Isherwood had studied history with enthusiasm and panache as a schoolboy; later, his revulsion from the dry, academic discipline he encountered at Cambridge propelled him toward literature as if it were an alternative to history, and in his case a mightily preferred one. But his autobiographies, travel books and novels—even the early, most genuinely fictionalized ones—all bear the mark of his historical outlook. He had a journalist's instinct for knowing where to go and who to observe and talk to, and he rendered his vivid personal impressions with a historian's sense of the interconnection between the popular psyche and the facts of social and political change. In his best work, Isherwood consistently achieved the task laid out for literature by his schoolmate and lifelong friend, Edward Upward, who believed that imaginative literature could not escape its relation to material reality and that the socially responsible writer ought to portray the forces at work beneath the surface of material reality which will shape the future of society.

Upward became a dogmatic Marxist in the early 1930s, and he explained in a 1937 essay that:

For the Marxist critic . . . a good book, is one that is true not merely to a temporarily existing situation but also to the future conditions which are developing within that situation. The greatest books are those which, sensing the forces of the future at work beneath the surface of the past or present reality, remain true to reality for the longest period of time.¹

Isherwood first became seriously involved with political ideas during his years in Berlin; he had strong communist sympathies in the 1930s, but he never joined the party. His regret, and moreover his sense of guilt, at not having been able to commit himself like Edward Upward to the revolutionary cause of the workers in Europe and England, contributes to the bitter tension of his slim masterpiece *Prater Violet* (1945); related feelings about being away from England during the war fuelled his ingenious and somewhat brittle arguments about emigration and pacifism in his wartime diaries and in his next novels, *The World in the Evening* (1954) and *Down There on a Visit* (1962). For most of his life, Isherwood was not politically committed. As an artist, he abstained, and he bore the guilt of turning his back on worthy causes about which he thought and wrote but in which he took no active role. But as he was finally able to write in his reconstructed diary, “Christopher was certainly more a socialist than he was a fascist, and more a pacifist than he was a socialist. But he was a queer first and foremost.”²

Gay liberation was the only movement for social change to which Isherwood ever felt personally and entirely committed. In July 1971 he noted in his diary that he felt compelled, now, to mention his homosexuality to everyone who interviewed him, and just a few months earlier he had confessed that he was attracted to the idea of himself as “one of the Grand Old Men of the movement.”³ His later work fulfils Upward’s principles in a way that Upward could not have foreseen in 1937 (though Upward read and admired virtually all that Isherwood wrote in the 1970s). Upward had written in the same 1937 essay:

A writer, if he wishes at all to tell the truth, must write about the world as he has already experienced it in the course of his practical

¹ “Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature,” *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*, ed. C. Day-Lewis (London, 1937), pp. 46–7.

² P. 190.

³ *Diaries 1960–1983*, April 19, 1971.

living. And if he shares the life of a class which cannot solve the problems that confront it, which cannot cope with reality, then no matter how honest or talented he may be, his writing will not correspond to reality. . . . He must change his practical life, must go over to the progressive side of the conflict. . . .¹

For Upward, the struggle was a class struggle, and the progressive side of the struggle was the side of the workers. He divorced his own class to join the workers, and even gave up his writing, for a time, to do communist party work. For Isherwood, the struggle proved to be a sexual struggle, and he was already on the progressive side, the side of the homosexuals; but that side had yet to assemble itself. And it took Isherwood several decades to find the way to acknowledge his side openly, both in his life and in his work.

Isherwood never gave up his writing as Upward did; for he was a writer above all, not an activist, even when it came to his homosexual kind. By writing in explicit sexual detail about his intimate behavior and that of his close friends and acquaintances in the years immediately following the war, he was portraying the hidden energies and affinities of homosexual men all over the United States who during that period were gathering increasingly in certain, mostly coastal cities as peace and prosperity returned to a country much altered by vast wartime mobilization. This hidden social group, whose consciousness of itself as a group was intensified by the demographic shifts brought about by the war and then extended throughout the 1950s, was to emerge in its own right as a significant force of change in America and in western culture generally during the final third of the twentieth century. Much of this change began in southern California, and Isherwood was living at its source. His personal myth is part of, and in many ways emblematic of, the larger myth of the group to which he belonged; and his reconstruction of his life during the postwar years foretells much of what was to come.

In *The World in the Evening*, the novel he was working on during the lost years of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Isherwood wrote more explicitly and more sympathetically than ever before about homosexual and bisexual characters. And he manipulated his publishers and compromised with convention just enough to succeed in getting into print two unsensational homosexual love scenes and a few somewhat more subversive ideas and psychological insights. The sentiments he recorded in his reconstructed diary in 1971, about his sense of

¹ "Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature," pp. 51-2.

political commitment to queers, were already articulated clearly in *The World in the Evening* by his character Bob Wood, who remarks on joining the army, “I can’t be a C.O. because, if they declared war on queers—tried to round us up and liquidate us, or something—I’d fight. I’d fight till I dropped. I know that. I’d be so mad I wouldn’t even feel scared. . . . So how can I say I’m a pacifist?”¹

Possibly Isherwood felt emboldened to write more candidly about homosexuals after reading Gore Vidal’s novel *The City and the Pillar*, which Vidal had sent to him in manuscript before its 1948 publication. Three other books which he mentions in the reconstructed diary as having made an even stronger impression on him around the same time, and which have forthright and unsettling passages about homosexuals, were John Horne Burns’s *The Gallery* (1947), Calder Willingham’s *End as a Man* (1947), and Willard Motley’s *Knock on Any Door* (1947).² American attitudes to homosexuality were changing generally in the postwar period in any case, and 1948 also saw the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s massive volume of research, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*—begun in 1938 and based on countless interviews which suggested that as many as thirty-seven percent of men had at least one homosexual experience after the onset of adolescence.

Closer to his heart, Isherwood was almost certainly influenced by the defiant personal style of his companion of the late 1940s, the photographer William Caskey, who was fully capable of the sorts of remarks Isherwood put into the mouth of his character Bob Wood. Wood is partly modelled on Isherwood’s later lover and longterm friend Jim Charlton, but Isherwood writes in the reconstructed diary that, “Bob Wood isn’t a portrait of Jim, however; he is described as a crusader, a potential revolutionary—which Jim certainly wasn’t and isn’t.”³ Caskey, on the other hand, “declared his homosexuality loudly and shamelessly and never cared whom he shocked. He was a pioneer gay militant in this respect—except that you couldn’t imagine him joining any movement.”⁴

¹ *The World in the Evening* (New York, 1954), p. 66; (London, 1954), p. 79.

² Isherwood met Burns in 1947, and records in the reconstructed diary that he wished he had had time to know him better. *End as a Man* he called “an exciting discovery and the beginning of Christopher’s (more or less) constant enthusiasm for Willingham’s work” (p. 176, n.). Of *Knock on Any Door* he writes, “Christopher was much moved . . . when he read it; this was his idea of a sad story. He fell in love with the hero and wrote Willard Motley a fan letter” (p. 140, n.2). Motley’s hero, a heterosexual petty criminal who hustles as trade part time, personifies the absolute defiance of authority which so often captivated Isherwood in his real-life acquaintances.

³ P. 159, n.1.

⁴ P. 54.

Isherwood makes clear in the reconstructed diary how greatly he admired Caskey's outspokenness about his sexuality. Sometimes Caskey's belligerence was too abrasive. For instance, he became bitterly angry with the Chilean painter Matta and his wife, when Matta well-meaningly said that he himself had tried sex with men, and Isherwood and Caskey never saw the Mattas again. But on other occasions Caskey was killingly witty about his homosexuality. To Natasha Moffat's friendly insult that she was glad to be seated next to "a pansy" during a dinner party at Charlie Chaplin's house, he replied: "Your slang is out of date, Natasha—we don't say 'pansy' nowadays. We say 'cocksucker.'" Natasha Moffat had a reputation for energetically offbeat behavior, and her sophisticated Parisian past as an intimate of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre made her tough enough for such repartee. Isherwood recalls in the reconstructed diary that her remark was loud and silenced the group; Caskey's more shocking reply restored the balance. And Isherwood goes on to write of his younger self, "Christopher, who truly adored Caskey at such moments, sat glowing with pride in him."¹ His own good manners would never permit him to behave as Caskey did, and he was capable, personally, of feeling embarrassment. "Caskey never suffered from embarrassment. He didn't give a damn what anybody knew about him."² Isherwood was immensely attracted to Caskey's bold insistence on the truth, his impatience with social nicety, his willingness to startle and disrupt. He recognized a need for such behavior and privately he identified with it.

The rebelliousness in Caskey which Isherwood so adored was among the chief things, in the end, which drove them apart. Their relationship was a constant struggle for power. Neither Caskey nor Isherwood was ever able to admit to the other that he was in love; each held back—guarded, suspicious, unwilling to trust. They often fought violently; Caskey could make Isherwood lose his temper so badly that Isherwood would shout and sometimes hit Caskey, especially when they were drunk. And Isherwood recalls in the reconstructed diary that drunkenness became a prevalent, destructive necessity: "drinking was a built-in dimension of their relationship; while sober, he felt, they never achieved intimacy."³ With the drinking came bad moods and lethargy, so that Isherwood worked less and less. The psychological conflict in their relationship was mirrored and underpinned by growing sexual incompatibility, and in

¹ P. 235.

² P. 182.

³ P. 53.

contrast to Isherwood's earlier love affairs, they shared no mythology about one another. They lived continually in the plain light of day, with no natural indulgence in fantasy, no artless playfulness, no imaginative games or magical naming. This made Isherwood feel the relationship was more grown-up than his others, but it also made the relationship harder to sustain. Through their mutual distrust and inability to yield, the pair were confined to a routine of selfconscious passion and relied upon forced playacting to fuel their lovemaking. Isherwood gave way to Caskey's aggressiveness almost out of politeness, but eventually certain tasks of role playing grew wearying. He admits that he would have split from Caskey sooner had he not feared to live alone; and indeed his fear of being alone shaped his romantic behavior throughout his life.

Nevertheless, the years with Caskey were Isherwood's first long-term domestic arrangement with a man close to his own age and emotional maturity. He felt genuinely proud of Caskey's social charm and included him entirely in his own social life, introducing Caskey to his various circles of friends—emigré artists and intellectuals like the Viertels, the Huxleys, and the Stravinskys as well as Greta Garbo and other film people in Hollywood; Swami Prabhavananda and his devotees at the Vedanta Society; literary friends like E. M. Forster and Stephen Spender in England, W. H. Auden and Lincoln Kirstein in New York; new friends like Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote and Gore Vidal; and many others. Introducing Caskey so widely contributed to a new and more open sense of himself as a homosexual. During the war years, when Isherwood lived among the Quakers and refugees in Haverford, Pennsylvania, and later when he tried to become a Hindu monk, he kept his sexuality quarantined from his everyday life. In Haverford he had concealed it; as an aspiring monk at the Vedanta Center he had tried during months of celibacy to rise above it. But once he fell in love with Caskey, everything changed; for a time he allowed his sexuality to shape his life as a whole.

During the same period, he became increasingly at home in a circle of close California friends of whom many were homosexual and most were at ease with homosexuality, so that his identity became established with solidity in the community around him. He was at first troubled by the consistency and honesty this began to require of him. As a young man, he had enjoyed the fragmented life which resulted from living in different countries among discrete groups of friends—shuttling between London and Berlin; fleeing through Greece, Portugal, Denmark and elsewhere with Heinz; shipping out to China with Auden; tasting Manhattan on the return

journey. Travelling had afforded him semi-secrecy and any number of escape routes from commitment and from himself. He had engaged in simultaneous love affairs and played freely with several personalities and social strategies, just as he played with the characters in his books. But his postwar life in California permitted him no hiding places. As he writes in the reconstructed diary: “Christopher found that his life had become all of a piece; everybody knew everything there was to know about him. In theory, he saw that this was morally preferable; it made hypocrisy and concealment impossible. In practice, he hated it.”¹

The unification of his life and identity brought to the fore with a new seriousness the question of who he really was and wanted to be. Now he could not escape the results of his actions, and he would be forced to live more deliberately, with a new sense of self and responsibility. But it would take some years before he could achieve coherence between his moral outlook and his day-to-day behavior, and even longer before such coherence would be reflected in his writing. At first the fact that he no longer needed to guard his identity from his separate circles of friends and colleagues simply fed the growing undiscipline of his life in the late 1940s. He may have stopped bothering to write in his diary partly because he no longer needed to keep up a private, unifying narrative about his true self, the self at the controlling center of his various, sometimes less than genuine, social lives. But over the longer term, he would continue to need his diary to understand himself, and by the time he began writing in it again—occasionally in 1948, then gradually more often by the early 1950s—he would already be writing about a different person. In the 1970s he would still be trying to achieve, in his reconstructed diary, a coherent account of the changes which had taken place in him during the dissipated personal aftermath of the war.

In August 1949, Isherwood attended an all-night party at the house of Sam From. The other guests whom he mentions in his 1955 outline of the period² and in his reconstructed diary were Evelyn Caldwell, Paul Goodman, Charles Aufderheide and Alvin Novak. These were members and friends of The Benton Way Group, a bohemian ménage, mostly from the Midwest, sharing a house in Benton Way, in Los Angeles. They were intellectuals, generally highly educated, and predominantly homosexual. Goodman was a

¹ P. 182.

² *D1*, pp. 389–94.

philosopher, social critic, published poet, and novelist whose work Isherwood later came to admire; Aufderheide a movie camera technician who read widely and wrote poetry on the side; Novak a philosophy student at UCLA. Sam From himself was a successful businessman. Others who were part of The Benton Way Group at various times—including Isadore From, David Sachs, Edouard Roditi, Fern Maher—were psychoanalysts, philosophers, scholars, social workers, artists.

Evelyn Caldwell, soon to marry and change her name to Evelyn Hooker, was the psychologist specializing in Rorschach techniques who was about to begin what became her life's work: studying the homosexual community in Los Angeles. She attended many homosexual parties where she joined in the revelry but also engaged in long, personal conversations with the other guests, and within a year of the party where she and Isherwood met, she started to circulate extensive questionnaires and conduct scores of interviews and psychological tests. In 1956, at a professional conference in Chicago, she was to challenge widespread opinion among her colleagues when she presented the first results of her research, which demonstrated that expert psychologists could not distinguish homosexuals from heterosexuals on the basis of then standard, widely used personality tests. In fact, her results from these types of tests showed that as high a percentage of homosexuals as heterosexuals were psychologically well adjusted. She, like Isherwood, was to become a hero of gay liberation.

The conversation at Benton Way parties was friendly but also highbrow and wide-ranging, addressing literature, social change, and, as Isherwood recalls of the all-night party in 1949, the nature of homosexual love. That night the "Symposium," as he calls it, "continued until dawn." Then Isherwood returned home with Alvin Novak, the young man he deemed to be the Alcibiades of the group. In the reconstructed diary Isherwood exposes his mixed motives of passion and idealism and even recalls an element of farce: a drunken Sam From came along with Isherwood and Novak, evidently hoping for sex, then politely passed out, eliminating himself from competition. Isherwood writes in the reconstructed diary that "he later looked back upon that night as having been highly romantic. It was unique, at any rate. Christopher never went to a party that was quite like it."¹

In The Benton Way Group Isherwood had found a small intellectual community seriously and capably examining the predicament of

¹ P. 198.

the homosexual in modern society and at the same time pursuing an experiment in living that offered them some of the benefits of conventional family life without oppressing their sexuality. In a sense, he had found a new version of Magnus Hirschfeld's Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for Sexual Science) where he had, as he put it in *Christopher and His Kind*, first been "brought face to face with his tribe"¹ in Berlin in late 1929. According to *Christopher and His Kind*, Hirschfeld's respectable, scientific approach to sexuality had at first offended Isherwood's puritanism, but in the end Isherwood was captivated by Hirschfeld's persona as a "silly solemn old professor."² Over the years he came to honor Hirschfeld and his personally dangerous campaign to revise the German criminal code so that homosexual acts between men would be legal.

Hirschfeld was homosexual, Evelyn Hooker was not; and yet there are obvious parallels in their work and in their practical style of approach. Isherwood became close friends with Evelyn Hooker, and just as in Berlin he had rented a room from Hirschfeld's sister immediately next door to the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft, so at the beginning of the 1950s he rented the garden house at Evelyn Hooker's property on Saltair Avenue in Brentwood. His interest in the study of homosexuality was far from superficial, and he evidently wished to involve himself with it both officially and personally. For Isherwood, and for his close friend W. H. Auden, sexual emancipation in Berlin had resulted partly from their anonymous access, as foreigners, to willing boys they met easily in bars and on the streets, and partly from the newly dawning self-understanding which resulted from conscious study of homosexuality and, in Auden's case, from a brief attempt at psychoanalysis. At Hirschfeld's institute, sexual love in all its strange and familiar forms was classified, codified, categorized. Along similarly analytical lines, Isherwood and Auden talked endlessly between themselves and with other friends about their relationships, and they read and also talked about Proust, Gide, Corvo, Freud, Jung, Georg Groddeck, Edward Carpenter, and many others. None of these literary and psychological texts offered them a satisfactory account of who they were. In their own work, throughout their careers, each of them continued to consider and address the question in any number of ways—veiled and indirect at first, then, in Isherwood's case, increasingly overt as the years went by. The earnest scientific thoroughness with which Evelyn Hooker, like Hirschfeld, approached her research, lent Isherwood's way of life in California a

¹ *Christopher and His Kind* (C&HK) (New York, 1976), p. 16; (London, 1977), p. 20.

² C&HK, U.S., p. 17; U.K., p. 20.

reassuringly dull legitimacy and probably contributed to his increasing openness about his homosexuality in his writing as well as in his personal life.

In the early 1950s when he was living next door to Evelyn Hooker, Isherwood agreed to write a popular book with her about homosexuality. The plan came to nothing, in part because when Don Bachardy moved into the garden house with Isherwood, Hooker's husband became anxious that Bachardy's youthful appearance would cause a scandal, and the Hookers asked Isherwood to move out. This left Isherwood and Bachardy homeless—a tiny echo of the crisis Isherwood had experienced when Heinz Neddermeyer was refused entry to England in 1934—and it caused a terrible strain in Isherwood's friendship with Evelyn Hooker. Two decades later, in December 1970, just as Isherwood was wondering what to write next after Kathleen and Frank, she reminded him of the project. But the idea made him anxious, and his reaction was perhaps still colored by resentment at her failure to stand by him in his relationship with Don Bachardy. On December 11 he wrote:

Saw Evelyn Hooker yesterday. She wants me to work with her on a "popular" book on homosexuality. . . . I am doubtful about the project. It seems that I shall have to read through sixty case histories and then write about them—which really means retell them, and what the hell is the use of that? Non-writers never understand what writers can and cannot do. They think they can tell you what to say and that you will then somehow magically resay it so it's marvellous. However, I didn't want to refuse straight away. I'll read some of the stuff first and try to find out exactly what it is that Evelyn expects. She is a very good woman and her intentions are of the noblest and I would like to help her, if I can do so without becoming her secretary.

Isherwood read through just two of the case histories and felt certain that the language of psychology was not his own language. In February he wrote:

This morning I also finished the second of the two files I borrowed from Evelyn Hooker. What a plodding old donkey Psychology is! Evelyn's questions are full of phrases like, "his own processes of sexual arousal are on an ascending incline," "I don't have a very clear picture of how much mutual stimulation is going on," "the primary stimulation is on the head of the penis, would that be true?," "while I have asked you many questions about sexual preferences and gratifications, I have not really asked you

questions couched in his terms of the basic mechanics of sex.” I really can’t imagine myself working with Evelyn on this sort of thing; it would be like having to write a book in a foreign language. But I mustn’t prejudge the issue. I must wait until we have had a talk and I have found out just exactly what it is she wants me to contribute.¹

By March he had decided against the project:

Yesterday morning I saw Evelyn Hooker and told her that I can’t write her book with her. I think I explained why I can’t quite lucidly and I think I convinced her. The analogy of Kathleen and Frank was very useful, in doing this, because Kathleen’s diaries can be likened to Evelyn’s files of case histories. The diaries, like the case histories, can be commented on, they can be elucidated and conclusions can be drawn from them; but they can’t be rewritten because nothing can be as good as the source material itself. What is embarrassing—and what I think sticks as a reproach against me in Evelyn’s mind—is that I told her, in the Saltair Avenue days, I was prepared to write a “popular” book about homosexuality with her. Of course I was always saying things like this, quite irresponsibly, subconsciously relying on the probability that I wouldn’t ever be taken up on them. To Evelyn yesterday I said, “Well, you know, in those days I was nearly always drunk”; which, the more I think of it, was a silly tactless altogether second-rate remark.²

Indeed, it was during the Saltair Avenue days that Isherwood had made an analogous promise to Swami Prabhavananda: that he would write a biography of Ramakrishna. Swami persistently reminded Isherwood of the promise, and Isherwood fulfilled it, taking more than a decade to write *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (1965). He had to submit each chapter of the biography to the order for approval, and the project made him into a quasi-official historian of the Ramakrishna movement. Likewise, through his later works and his diaries, he was to become a historian of the homosexual movement, but without professional psychology or any other “official” involvements; instead, he was to tell its history through his own experience. Although Isherwood slighted the idea of rewriting Evelyn Hooker’s case histories, he was already reflecting upon a similar project on his own terms. Later that same month he records that he has begun to

¹ Diaries 1960–1983, February 22, 1971.

² Diaries 1960–1983, March 2, 1971.

take notes about the private behavior patterns of Don Bachardy (“Kitty”) and himself (“Dobbin”). Despite his outcry against psychology, his description of his plan is technical, as if he intended to produce a special kind of case history of his own:

On the 17th, I started a sort of notebook on Kitty and Dobbin—I’ll try to write it rather like a study in natural history; their behavior, methods of communication, feeding habits, etc. I had very strong feelings that I ought not to record all this, that it was an invasion of privacy. But where else have I ever found anything of value? The privacy of the unconscious is the only treasure house. And as a matter of fact, Don is always urging me to write about us. I have no idea, yet, what I shall “do” with this material after I’ve collected it. I’ll just keep jotting things down, day by day, and see what comes of it.¹

Like all of Isherwood’s work, this project was to begin with external observation and recording. By invading his own privacy, by being frank to the point of indiscretion, he could unlock what he calls “the only treasure house,” the unconscious. Ordinary habits, the routine of daily life, accurately noted, would reveal the inward, original activity of the mind in its rich, dreamy, nonpersonal, eternal existence. Thus, like a scientist—or perhaps like a spy or a thief—Isherwood set out to make himself and Don Bachardy the subject of a domestic field study.

But the notebook of Kitty and Dobbin was also abandoned, and in the end Isherwood left no specific account of his intimate life with Bachardy. Although his diaries from 1953 onward comprise an episodic narrative of their years together, he never fully analyzed their relationship nor explained its mythology. The names alone, Kitty—suggesting a creature soft and vulnerable, quick to purr and quick to claw—and Dobbin—old, strong and steady, but stubborn and a little boring—tell a great deal. None of the other intimate mythologies which Isherwood describes in the reconstructed diary draws upon animal imagery. They are generally more rivalrous and combative—some derived from wrestling and boxing—or more intellectual and literary—for instance, rooted in Whitman’s poetry. Isherwood observes in the reconstructed diary that an animal myth can sustain a relationship when there is conflict: “in the world of animals, hatred is impossible; [they] can only love each other. They focus their aggression on mythical external enemies.”² Moreover,

¹ Diaries 1960–1983, March 19, 1971.

² P. 60, n.2.

animals have no language; their world of nestling warmth is based upon physical trust, is inchoate, and inaccessible to outsiders. In the great love relationship of his life, Isherwood, a writer, evidently surrendered to a mythology that did not depend upon language; its parameters could not be declaimed, enforced, or justified by words. They simply had to be acted out. For Isherwood, the relationship may well have been too mysterious or simply too important to dissect. In any case, it was still taking shape at the time of his death, and this, too, may have made it, for him, untellable. Isherwood said in his Thanksgiving diary entry of 1970 that he could not write a book about his friendship with Swami while Swami was still alive because “the book couldn’t be truly complete until after Swami’s death.”¹ Swami died in 1976; *My Guru and His Disciple* was published in 1980. Despite Isherwood’s own death in 1986, the story of his relationship with Don Bachardy is even now unfinished.

Although he did not continue in the spring of 1971 with the study of Kitty and Dobbin, Isherwood circled around the idea of a factual, explicit record of his most private life until he at last began the reconstructed diary which, through the gradual accumulation of detailed, intimate, and sometimes trivial, day-to-day memories, gained access to the treasure house of the unconscious and its store of mythology. As he repeated in each of his diary entries about Evelyn Hooker, Isherwood was convinced he must write about homosexuality in his own language. The language of psychology was foreign. His “kind,” his tribe, were homosexuals; his kind were also writers. And he asserted that a non-writer, like Evelyn Hooker, could not understand this. He identified with writers, admired writers, socialized with writers. In his reconstructed diary, as in *Christopher and His Kind*, his identity as a homosexual is portrayed as being inseparable from his identity as a writer. And he incorporates in both of these personal histories an account of how he drew on his real-life experiences of the 1930s and 1940s for his fiction, telling how he adapted the facts of his life to suit his artistic purpose. Thus, *Lost Years* and *Christopher and His Kind* reveal not only how he had secretly lived as a homosexual, but also how he had secretly lived as a writer, continually reshaping the truth in his work. In both books, he recalls the works he hoped to write as well as the ones which came to fruition, and so measures himself, ruthlessly, against his unfulfilled ambitions as well as his actual achievements.

¹ Diaries 1960–1983, November 26, 1970.

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