A Brief Introduction to a Large Topic

This is a book about a staircase and the men who lived on it. In traditional Cambridge and Oxford colleges, the central, oldest buildings, where people live and teach, are constructed around staircases (rather than hallways or corridors). Each staircase has an entranceway with rooms located either side of the staircase, up a series of floors. These staircases are usually labelled in alphabetical order, starting with 'A Staircase' (not to be confused with 'a staircase') and each room on the staircase has a number: so my room in my college is E5 – the fifth room on E Staircase, on the top floor, overlooking the River Cam. People often feel very attached to these staircases, because of the intimacy of living so closely together with a few friends (or enemies). Most staircases have only a few rooms, rarely more than twelve, often only six or eight. In the imagination – and in reality – the staircase becomes a place where emotional memories are laid down, life choices made, friendships for life formed. This book started when I realised that three very significant figures in the history of King's College, Cambridge, each of whom was what we would now call gay, had lived in the same room, H1, a year apart. I thought it would make a stimulating short piece for the college blog: 'A room with a view' … But as I started reading, I discovered not only that there were other men, whom I had not known about, who lived on H staircase,

and on G staircase, the next staircase along, who were also men who desired males, but also that there was a flourishing community over several generations who happily took up residence in these rooms and elsewhere in college. A picture gradually emerged of a unique world of male desire, which was very different from the histories of homosexuality that I had read. This book sets out to paint the picture of this community, this queer place.

I have called the book *Queer Cambridge* because it is set in Cambridge, significantly and integrally so. 'H Staircase' (my working title) wasn't likely to be as instantaneously informative as a publisher would desire, nor would 'Queer King's' (though that has a certain ring). In an age when global history has a premium, my story has an even more intimate narrative than my title suggests. (I hope no reader is too disappointed by their favourite queer icon – or their relatives – not being included: this is not an encyclopaedia.) What is at stake, however, is far larger and embracing: how are we to tell the story of what has been defined as a transgressive desire in society? What – how *queer* – is a queer community? Can one particular place open a revelatory portal onto the broad histories that define modernity's transitions?

But before we enter this world in all its riveting detail, I want to explain a little further why this book has been written and how it fits into what has become the burgeoning field of gay history. A very brief introduction …

There are trajectories in the history of homosexuality that are by now well established, at least in academic circles, at least in the West. The first concerns the very word 'homosexuality'. It was first used in English in the translation of Richard Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia*

Sexualis, a foundational work of German sexology, in 1892, no earlier. That's why David Halperin provocatively called his book of 1990 *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*. (The very first usage of the word actually seems to have been by Karl-Maria Kerbeny in the late 1860s, but it is Krafft-Ebing who started its popularity: 1892 is the date that counts.) Homosexuality as a term won out gradually over other scientific coinages, insults and self-identifications: Urning, Uranian, Invert, Sodomite and so forth, which now look as distinctly old-fashioned in contemporary English as 'phlogiston', if they are understood at all. There was, for example, a group of poets who – with self-conscious and provocative explicitness – called themselves the 'Uranians', linked as they were by their love of youths; but 'homosexuality' was not really a common term in English until the 1920s, and even then it still had the aura of a rather faddish technical term, especially to older speakers, who were not quite sure if they did indeed have something called a 'sexuality'.[1]

This changing language constitutes a fascinating example of what is meant by a 'fugitive discourse'.[2] As male desire for other males flits in and out of view in a society that denigrated it and, indeed, made it illegal as well as despicable, the words to refer to it shift in usage, always on the run, and construct both a vocabulary of insult, on the streets, in the courts or newspapers, and also a language of self-identification and recognition, a private shared way of talking that excluded those not in the know. Much as the n-word has been reclaimed in recent times *by* black usage *for* black usage, so the word 'bugger' became a familiar term of recognition and

endearment among men in the first quarter of the twentieth century (whatever the sexual activities in mind) – and now, likewise, 'queer' has been shifted from insult to a term of pride, especially, belatedly, by literary critics. ('Bugger' now has become so blanched in England that anyone might say 'oh, bugger' when she spills her coffee, or do 'bugger all' on a wet Sunday: even 'bugger off!' is at the gentle end of cursing.) The language of desire, like the language of race, is politicised, medicalised, legalised – and also works to escape all these institutionalised frameworks, never fully successfully, in humour, concealment, challenge and refusal. The old and grumpy regularly moan about not knowing the right word to use these days.

The *scientific* language of sexology, however, marks a new direction for understanding male desire. Desire is now a sign and symptom of a *pathology*. You could *be* a 'homosexual'. Homosexuality became an identity. Even if you never had sex, you could be a homosexual. With this identity came an internalised shame encouraged by religious institutions, legal restrictions and social humiliation. And thus came, too, the strategies to respond to such shame, from in-your-face outrageousness to desperate suicide, from anguished denial to quietly enacted fulfilment – and many other ways of dealing with what was now life as a homosexual: a condition. When we say homosexuality, we raise not just questions of who is being referred to, but also how desire relates to identity. Can who you *fancy* really define who you *are*?

One consequence of this pathologisation for us is a pressing historical question: how, then, should we think about male desire for males *before* this pathology became the embedded normative way of thinking, before it

seemed natural to define people as homosexuals? Of course, there are plenty of examples of men desiring males from any period of history, which historians have been quick to collect, and indeed there has been focused, loving attention on societies like that of ancient Athens when such desire was an expected and normal part of erotic experience; and there has been a similar attention, at a more localised level, on more recent groups or institutions where men who desired men gathered in private, or in public concealment, such as molly houses in the eighteenth century – male brothels and drinking houses – which find modern echoes in the gay bars and saunas of the twentieth century and beyond. For some historians – Michel Foucault would be an icon of such thinking – this means that there were no homosexuals before the turn into the twentieth century; previously there were only men who committed sex acts with men. There was no possibility of self-recognition as a homosexual in the sense of an identity. Erotic object choice did not define who you were. For others – and here James Davidson has been more influential in taking the question to the heart of Greek love than the medievalist John Boswell has proved to be – there are signs that there were men who were recognised in the past as desiring men exclusively or obsessively, who could be contrasted with women-mad lovers.[3] A type, across time and culture. Was homosexuality always there, waiting, like Australia, for a Western authority to come and give it a name? Or was homosexuality not experienced as a condition, or as an identity, because nobody had the full-scale medical, legal and social language to identify it as such? A hundred (plus) years of homosexuality, named and shamed? Or multiple

centuries, under different names? In response to such polarised and polarising claims, medieval and early modern scholars in particular have tried to find a third way, sometimes dubbed 'queer unhistoricism', which in its most persuasive form attempts to move away from the insistence that choice of sexual partner as determining identity is the best or only way to discuss the evidence of the past, and seeks other routes to explore desire's expressivity: 'we are doing battle here, *per amore*, with history'.[4] The *homo-* in homosexual poses a question that is constantly at work in such discussions, though not always made explicit: how much am I the same as the person I desire? How different are the men who desire men from each other? And – the repeated turn to Greece adds – how similar and different are the moderns from the ancients?

When it comes to male desire for males, arguments about its acceptability have often turned on what is taken to be 'natural' or 'unnatural'. It matters greatly therefore to show the long continuity of such desires, a constant and inevitable presence in society. Consequently, arguments about the recent invention of homosexuality have often been confused with a polemic about whether male desire for males exists across time and different cultures, always already there – natural even when stigmatised. If there were no homosexuals before the nineteenth century, what does that mean for people who now think of their identity in such terms? This is a case where self-interest (in all senses) is all too likely to confuse historical argument.

This book runs from roughly the 1880s forward to the 1960s (and to today, of course). There were undoubtedly men who desired men before this in Cambridge, even on

occasion a brief and small 'thriving subculture of sodomy' (which Byron, for example, discovered in the first decade of the 1800s).[5] But there is a point to starting where I do. This story begins with men who certainly did not have an agreed language of recognition or identity, but who lived through the invention of homosexuality as a vocabulary and a form of understanding; and it ends with gay liberation's legal moment in Britain in 1967. The first chapter indeed is about the discovery of (their) homosexuality and the struggle these men experienced, as the science of sex and the public language of comprehension changed across their lifetimes. The fluidity of how these men expressed themselves and the variety of their deeply engaged behaviour across this earlier era makes for an especially complex and fascinating social picture. The anxiety about how to name people as sexualised beings and what they get up to – nowadays focused usually on the ever expanding list of letters that began with LBGQ, and, most heatedly, on the issue of trans – is not merely a modern worry, though it is often presented as a sign of the times. Or, rather, it is *precisely* a worry through which modernity understands or fails to understand itself *as* modern – a dynamic, ironically enough, that was already part of an intense debate about self-recognition in the early years of the last century. (Modernity is always forgetting the modernities of previous generations.) How desire can be imagined depends on the narratives available – and their capacity for change – and on the institutional framework for expressing such desire. The men I will be discussing all inhabited the same place – physical space and conceptual arena – and their different responses to their own time and erotic urges provide a particularly rich portrait of an era of fundamental transformation.

In short, the shifting, transformative self-understanding of male desire for males across the last 150 years provides the grounding for his book. At one point, I thought I would subtitle the book 'An Alternative History of Homosexuality', but that would have given the wrong signals, because *every* word in such a phrase just raises an awkward question. Is *homosexuality* ever an adequate term? What assumptions and difficulties does it bring? Can it get beyond the ideology of its own formation in nineteenth-century sexology? Can homosexuality have a *history*? If so, is it a history that starts at the end of the nineteenth century or does it go back to David and Jonathan in the Bible (or earlier, if you like)? Is there only one history or are there multiple narratives? Is it a story of Western repression and discovery? A universal category? The subtitle ended up – consequently – as 'an alternative history'… At least 'alternative' will do, I think, provided that it is clear that it is a history of an alternative – an alternative to many histories of gay life as well as to the formal history of the university – and that I don't mean an exclusionary alternative, but rather one of the multiple narratives that can be written. It is *a* history. But my wager is that it is a history that is telling, and worth telling – because it will tell us something alternative to the familiar accounts.

When David Halperin called his book *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* he was knowingly echoing Gabriel García Márquez's marvellous novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This echo is not just a casual gesture of arty sophistication. The history of homosexuality – as I will continue to call it, with all due demurrals, for convenience's sake – has most often been written as a history of

fragmentation, loneliness, solitary searches for other solitary men, a world of the city street. There are many exceptions, some of which play a major role in this book; examples where men not only had long-term relationships with men, but also on rarer occasions did so in public. Edward Carpenter (1844–1929) was a guru who lived in Derbyshire for thirty years with George Merrill. A visit to Edward Carpenter was part of a liberal education for many writers and artists.[6] George Merrill, who placed his hand on E. M. Forster's buttock, transforming Forster's sensibility (Forster tells us), was instrumental in Forster turning to write *Maurice*, his novel of gay love that was published only posthumously. Forster himself, much more quietly, had a long-term relationship with a married policeman. Howard Sturgis, also a novelist, though a rather mawkish one, lived for decades with William Haynes-Smith, who was known to everyone in their immediate social circle as 'The Babe', a name E. F. Benson took for the title of one of his best-selling university novels of young men about Cambridge, *The Babe, B.A.* – an insider joke. Yet the majority of stories of gay life concentrate on the city as an alienating environment, made threatening by violent and invasive policing, and made discomforting by social stigma and repression. The life of John Addington Symonds has become paradigmatic, partly because he has left such a full set of personal reminiscences. (The focus on his erotic life, mind you, has rather overshadowed the rich complexity of his intellectual world, his own sense of being a 'stifled anachronism', investigated recently and most obsessively – his word – by Shane Butler.) Symonds vividly describes his internalised shame, his transformative reading of ancient Greek texts

that offered a different view of the world, his gradual growth of physicality and his serial pickups of soldiers for sex. It was Symonds too who translated Krafft-Ebing and thus introduced the word 'homosexuality' into English. His publication of *A Problem in Greek Ethics* – in only ten copies to start with – is also a fine example of how reading books on Greek love and on sexology formed a crucial part of many men's self-understanding and self-recognition. 'He has read Havelock Ellis' – the famous theorist of sexology and homosexuality in particular – could be a coded wink between men well into the twentieth century (the quotation is from a letter in the 1940s, open to censorship, of course, about a potential friendship with a young soldier during the Second World War).[7] As Symonds – and many others – found out, some working-class men were content enough to earn some much needed extra money by providing sexual services for middle- and upper-class men. The working-class men, it appears, did not see themselves, nor were seen, as being homosexual for having sex with men: it was a financial arrangement of convenience. ('Homosex' without the homosexuality …)[8] The middle- and upper-class men avoided the social anxiety of a relationship in their own social circle, and, in many cases, followed their own desires for a particular sort of manliness. With guardsmen on the Strand in London such arrangements were almost as regularised as with the female prostitutes on Piccadilly. Oscar Wilde called such hookups 'feasting with panthers' (as we will see), and it was the cross-class intimacy almost as much as the same-sex activity that seems to have dismayed the court in his trial.[9] For many young men, however, their desires made them solitary, frightened and

confused. In London and other expanding, industrialised cities, where loneliness was all too easily a way of life, the urban experience was definitional of homosexual activity. The German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, looking on as a foreigner, contrasted European and British sex. While the European men enjoyed mutual masturbation, the English, he declared, resorted to silent anonymous groping in parks and alleyways, a misery enforced by the 'conspiration [sic = conspiracy] of silence about homosexuality in England'.[10]

Against this picture of fragmentation, anxiety and disdain, other more actively and positively communal scenes also flair into vision. Berlin before the Second World War allowed a brief, remarkable licence for queer life, both for men and for women, until the Nazis violently destroyed it as a matter of policy. There were celebrated bars and clubs in Paris in the same period, which were also eventually closed. British men and women, especially from the more elite classes, visited both cities to escape not just from the restrictions of British social expectation but also from the chance of being exposed in their own communities. Every major city in Europe and in the Americas has a discrete and fascinating story of its own queer past, its nostalgias, pains, celebrations and self-serving memories.[11] Working with such accounts, modern sociologists and historians of sexuality have been fascinated about when, where and whether a queer community can be recognised, both in the past and in the present – when, that is, you can recognise something beyond some friendships, or beyond particular styles of behaviour: an acknowledged group, existing over time with its own urban space(s).[12] In the self-styling of both academic

and more personal, anecdotal narratives, the 1960s, with its legal and social changes, marks a crucial turning point. While 'friendship networks are the avenues through which gay social worlds are constructed', from the 1960s onwards, what were first called gay ghettos and then, more happily, gayberhoods, became a regular feature of the self-recognition of city living. To begin with, these were seen as 'a spatial response to a historically specific form of oppression', places where queer people could dress, live their lives and express affection publicly without fear of violence or unpleasantness: the Castro in San Francisco, Boyztown in Chicago (East Lakeview); Old Compton Street in London, the seaside town of Brighton.[13] It became possible to 'construct a gay city in the midst of (and often invisible to) the normative city'. Gayberhoods were 'inseparable from the development of the gay community as a social movement': part of the sexual politics of the city.[14] Gradually – more quickly in some cities – it was intently recognised that the queer population – by which was meant largely white, middle-class, employed, single men without children – had considerable disposable income. Gayberhoods were also sites of gentrification, and thus deeply attractive to developers. And they were cool destinations for tourism, especially for queers from elsewhere. (There is no city living that is not deeply infected by capitalism's structures of power.) With a few exceptions – the most celebrated being the Castro in San Francisco – the boundaries and focus of gayberhoods also shift (like the fugitive language of queer discourse). How much such spaces constitute a community is constantly questioned by those living in them. 'More a concentration … than a community', commented one queer

woman of the once renowned Park Slope district of Brooklyn: 'several networks of people', with different values and aims, soon on the move to elsewhere in the city. Any district's demography could change, and change rapidly. 'There goes the gayberhood' has become the catchphrase for the mix of feelings about such change – nostalgia, surprise, anger, along with a recognition that different styles of living become attractive at different points in a person's life-cycle (queer or not): the older are happier to get away from the wilder side of the gayberhoods. Is the move away from the ghetto a desirable triumph of assimilation, or a sell-out into imitative bourgeois comfort? Queers are not alone among minority groups in asking this question.[15]

For all these narratives of the coming of modernity – and there are many variations and many different cities analysed in such terms – the past is another country. Modernity sees itself as progress, with its hard-won turning points, and for many people this has been simply true, and simply positive – reasonably enough, for all that there are still counterforces of hostility, often violent, against such acceptance of queer men and women in society (there is no city living without conflict, either). But my story slows down as it reaches the rupture of the 1960s. When I say I am offering an alternative history it must be clear that I am not redrafting the history of male desire for males from David and Jonathan to Ian McKellen. When I state that this alternative history is about the unique role of a particular community, it would be ridiculous to be taken to mean that there are no other claims to be a community, certainly in the present, and even and most saliently in the past. Rather, this book

offers a picture of one community profoundly surprising in its longevity, its singular place, its influence beyond itself, and its existence within an era of severe legal and social restriction on the practice and expression of desire. As such, it offers precisely an alternative picture of the other country of the past, an alternative picture of what a queer community could mean, then, even then. And it is a story with consequences for how we think about the here and now of belonging.

It has been important, politically and historically, to describe the effects of the legal restrictions and the severe policing of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, which lasted even beyond the time of the legalisation of (some) sex between (some) men in 1967. The evidence for the difficult solitude, and patterns of intermittent sex with men who were not likely to be met again, has been well catalogued within the history of homosexuality.[16] 'My real life', wrote the American writer Frederic Prokosch, 'has transpired in darkness, secrecy, fleeting contacts and incommunicable delights … My real life has been subversive, anarchic, vicious, lonely and capricious.'[17] This sharp reality has been turned by some activist critics into a positive spin: for them, this style of life can challenge the assumption that long-term monogamous relationships need to be the bedrock of social propriety and stability (an activism that strives to reclaim old pain into new moral insistence and even hope).[18] The brief encounters of solitude form one necessary framework for the history of homosexuality. But this book is about something else: it is about a community of men, many of whom came to Cambridge as eighteen-year-old youths and stayed their whole lives; many started at Cambridge, stayed a few

years, and then left to make their careers elsewhere in Britain or internationally but came back to Cambridge regularly. They maintained their relationships across time and space, a bond forged as undergraduates or young academics. The college, true to its monastic origins, was a community of single men.

There are many outstanding, full and carefully researched biographies of some of the luminaries of this world – Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Rupert Brooke – which do not need rehearsing in all their detail. So too the Bloomsbury Group, as it has come to be known, has fascinated generations of subsequent scholars, not least for their outspoken attitudes towards conventional behaviour and attitudes. This book aims to do something slightly different (though for sure it has drawn on this work gratefully). First, I am interested in what difference a *place* makes. In contrast to arguments about the universal nature of male desire or the broad evolution of human sexuality – both, it must be said, thoroughly nineteenth-century obsessions as well as modernity's shibboleths – this book starts by looking at one staircase in one college in one university: the men who lived on H staircase in King's College, Cambridge. Now, I could make a claim that the University of Cambridge was at the centre of the educational system and class structure of the largest empire the world had ever known, and thus of an importance far beyond my evidently – supremely – parochial focus. But actually, although this (self-)importance is partly justifiable, and although such self-promoting grandiosity certainly is a regular element of the self-representation of the characters in this story, never slow to see themselves as acting on the broadest of world stages, I am more fascinated precisely by

the small scale itself. The few dozens of men I will be discussing revelled in the minutiae of their lives, fixated on the narcissism of small differences between their rooms, other colleges, the cuts of jib through which they presented themselves to the world – while, in many cases, making major international contributions to economics, the novel, poetry, world politics, art, music … I want to see what difference it made that they did all live in this small place, talking, drinking and living together, in their odd domesticity. The college was *not* the streets of London, *not* the ports or resorts of Europe, and certainly *not* simply a public arena. It was a closed community that fascinated the outside world (and was fascinated by itself), and that had a continuing influence on the public life of the country. How does such an institutional framework change the possible narratives of homosexual history?

But I am also fascinated by how this community itself as a community contrasts with the solitude of the city streets with its pickups. This community was forged through relationships, friendships, affairs that stretched over many years, and were maintained through the contretemps and shared memories of a contentious familial group of men. There are two immediate, crucial consequences of this. First, as the discourse of homosexuality was being invented, disseminated and explored, this transformative process of self-definition was taking place at the same time within this group of men who were making their own social world through repeated stories, retrospective anecdotes and prospective planning. The community's own transformation was shaped by and contributed to the shaping of public comprehension and narratives of male desire – and struggled to reject, work with and fit

into such a new shaping of possibility. With all the self-reflection of an Escher picture, they were drawing the map on which they would locate themselves. What a homosexual history might look like was a constant subject of conversation over many years between men who became the heroes of this history of homosexuality. This is a history of homosexuality through people who spent hours talking about (the history of) homosexuality. Secondly, each of the men in this story grew up and changed across these years, unless they died young and became fixed images of floppy-haired youthfulness. The young men who came from school to university, to be met and educated by older dons, became those older dons in turn, or returned to college as friends from outside. Although many a biography takes a person from birth through to death, for sure, such monocular narratives rarely capture the sense of change within a community, the way in which as you grow older you grow into your mentor's shoes while observing the young Turks coming up, and experience such transitions together with friends. The community is formed in *intergenerational* passing on – of stories, possessions, values – and in working out how tradition is both to be exercised and to be recalibrated over time, as you respond to external pressures, the logic of internal change, and institutional development. A community like a college depends on the performance of tradition, but each performance is a form of re-creation: there is no tradition without the enactment, but every enactment also opens the possibility of changing the script or allowing the script to alter over time. Nobody quite takes the place of his mentor. In the period covered by this book there were the seismic shocks of two world wars, the

Great Depression and the move from an elite education system towards a more democratically open institution, marked by an extraordinary change in size and intellectual ambition. How the college was changing was a subject of the same fascinated, constant conversation as how homosexual experience was changing.

Sara Ahmed coined the phrase 'giddy places' as she searched to articulate the relation between space and what she calls queer phenomenology.[19] A college can feel like a 'giddy place', where each year there is an influx of young people whose lives are in a transitional and potentially transformational state. The memory of college life, as repeatedly articulated through memoirs and biographies, is paradigmatically a memory of self-discovery, of coming to be the person – the hero – of a later story. The time of student life, like all rites of passage, allows for – demands even – bad behaviour, a period of licence, a certain giddiness. Yet a college, especially a college founded in the fifteenth century, also projects an institutional groundedness, an awareness of its own long history, the permanence of a home. Unlike the shifting attractions of a molly house or gay bar or club, the University of Cambridge has centuries of giddiness in its records, and, most pertinently, is peopled by the academics who have chosen to make a home in it. A home without a family, or without a family in its established sense: for most of the decades of this history, many fellows lived in college, and even when they had houses (and even wives and children in them), spent many evenings dining in college, as well as working there. A wonderfully eccentric example is Nathaniel Wedd, a great friend of many of the leading figures in this book, especially E. M. Forster (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Nathaniel Wedd in full Edwardian splendour – boater, cane and all.

In the 1920s, when he was in his fifties, he had been married to a female classicist from Newnham College, Rachel Evelyn White, for over a decade. He continued to live in college; his wife visited him for breakfast each morning in his rooms; he went to High Table for dinner on his own each night; she dined – better food, he grumbled – at a restaurant on King's Parade opposite the college gates, and retired to her rooms for the night, also on King's Parade, not a hundred metres from her husband's rooms. 'There were no children' is the dry comment of the fellow who records this bizarre set-up – and who insists, looking back in continuing bafflement forty years later, that Wedd was 'not a homosexual'. 'A fellow may not live with his wife in college' is still the rule (though now it is wife or husband), and Wedd's was one way, I suppose, to negotiate the regulations.[20] And for most students, college marks a decisive break – expressed in

multiple forms of intensity and effectiveness – with a child's experience of family life. The continuity of the architecture of the college, visually dominated by the Gibbs Building, the chapel and the lawns they frame, and the continuity of the fellows as a real and imagined community, is what people who came back to visit college, in the imagination or in person, came back to. A continuing other place, a place of continuing potential otherness, recalled as the place of choices made and future stories begun: where once … where another route was then still open.

This focus on a *single location*, on a *community of men* in this location, and on the *transformation* of this community over time – both as an institution and as a set of individuals – provide the three pillars of this book. In this way, the story offers a different and complementary picture of homosexual experience from the standard narratives.

It must be immediately emphasised that this is not an idealised or idealising narrative. It does not set out to imagine a homosexual society, a brotherhood, an elite cohort of lovers or any of the other familiar fantasies that have so often arisen from the oppressions and disappointments of the present. Almost all the characters we will meet come from what would today be recognised as an elite, although most would then have distinguished themselves as middle class rather than aristocratic. Several went to the same highly privileged private schools before university (a few to the same prep schools too), and most had the support and benefits of a wealthy upbringing in an imperial society confident in its entitlements. Many reflect the attitudes and assumptions of such a background. Some behave not so much flamboyantly as nastily – selfish, cruel, malicious, rapacious. All are white. All

are men: King's College did not admit women until 1972. There were only two women's colleges in Cambridge, and women could not be awarded degrees like the men until after the Second World War. Although there are women who appear in these stories and appear as strong, emotionally and intellectually engaged actors (think Virginia Woolf or Lydia Lopokova), the focus of the book follows the expectations of the times it describes, and the consequent sources of evidence, that all too often marginalise women even and especially in the domesticity of college. Queer heroines, like Jane Harrison, have their stories elsewhere.[21]

The archive for this history is huge – far more than any one scholar could hope to control. I have made liberal use of others' work, and spent a good deal of time in the archives myself. There are thousands and thousands of letters, millions of words of diaries and journals, biographies and autobiographies. Desire is always veiled, and illegal desire hidden, even when in plain sight: these papers rarely reveal a simple narrative, or tell all the details a historian might want, especially when the texts are published. When the texts are painfully explicit, it is almost always a sign of deep trauma or passionate need to break free of conventional repression, itself a sign of internal anguish. Consequently, a history of homosexuality has to move sinuously between recognising the importance and function of the veils and trying delicately to see behind them. There is always too much and too little said in any story of desire. The archives here reflect that dynamic at a grand scale.

The period this book covers, as I have already indicated, is one of political and social turmoil – not just the

two World Wars and the devastating consequences of economic deprivation, but also the febrile political discussions – and revolutions – that arise in response to the violence of empire, industrialisation and the competition between nation states. As was recognised at the time, the aftermath of the First World War constituted a social change of extreme proportions. The young men and women of the 1920s were desperate to articulate how different they were from their Victorian parents and grandparents – a dynamic repeated in the 1960s and 1970s. The localised history I trace is set against these national and international tectonic changes. I make little attempt to tell this history of transformations at such a grand scale: that would be a quite different project which many have already chronicled with real insight and incisiveness. Yet especially in the second chapter of the book, we will see that many of the figures of this history contributed significantly to these narratives of world history, and some did so from a perspective explicitly informed by their experience as gay men, as 'homosexuals'. The relation between the local and the wider national and political culture is a constant thread of the book. Each of the book's leading figures self-consciously set out to make a difference to national and even international culture, and did so with varying instrumental force.

The college is an educational institution, and there are few topics more heated in current discussion in academia and in the public imagination of schools and universities than the proper place of sexuality in such institutions. The questions have become public debates of increasing virulence, extremism and obfuscation, matched by attempts at regulation which, like all attempts to regulate desire in

society, become increasingly clumsy and inoperable the more comprehensive and watertight they seek to be. (Against this desperate drive towards certainty, Katherine Angel, more sensibly, though, inevitably, more provocatively, writes: '[W]e need to articulate an ethics of sex that does not try frantically to keep desire's uncertainty at bay. A sexual ethics that is worth its name has to allow for obscurity, for opacity and for not-knowing.')[22] Universities, certainly since the nineteenth century – examples back to antiquity are evident too, but less directly relevant – have been places where conventions and rules of sexuality have been put under particular stress: universities are places of challenge and experimentation (and have a lot of young people sequestered together, away from direct parental control). There has always been a worry about what young people get up to at university. This book tells many stories of sexualised relationships between teachers and pupils, colleagues in the workplace, students together, elite men and vulnerable or needy working-class men and youths. It would be trite if true to say that it is pointless to apply our contemporary moralising to all these examples from the past: it is much harder to escape the limitations of our own assumptions than the ease of such an assurance would suggest. More saliently, it is integral to such relationships that they were constantly the subject of moral consternation at the time. But mainly because they were between men; only occasionally because they involved students and dons. Indeed, one of the issues that has to be faced in this history of homosexuality is the regular pattern of young men who willingly and intently became the objects of desire of older men in these institutional contexts, and then – in

the community – became in turn over time the older men looking back towards a new generation of young men who were turning to them. This pattern is much harder to evidence with women, either in heterosexual or lesbian relationships. In the diaries and letters I have read, this experience of (male) transition is wondered about, used to reflect on aging – both maturing into manhood and becoming old – joked about, taken very seriously as a scene of love – but very rarely, if ever, moralised as a dangerously corrupt power relation, at least until quite recently. The community of men in King's was constantly talking about its relationships and what they meant and how to evaluate them – it was E. M. Forster, after all, who made 'only connect' the watchword of his personal politics – but the terms in which this anxiety was expressed were quite different from today's insistence on power and disparity. A history of homosexuality has to discuss how relationships between men are differently conceptualised, and all the more so in an educational institution, especially in the past.

One motivation for writing this book was reading an influential and inspirational study of the history and historiography of homosexuality, Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007). In it – among its many detailed investigative analyses – she generalises that 'The longing for community across time is a crucial feature of queer historical experience, one produced by historical isolation of individual queers, as well as by the damaged quality of the historical archive.'[23] What I hope to show in this book is that there were places where a longing for community became realised in a group of single men living together over time, working

together and recognising each other as men who desired men – who could be called homosexual and then gay and then queer. These were not isolated individuals, though we will certainly come across stories of loneliness and despair as there are bound to be in any such history. Rather, thanks to the intimacy of teaching, the sociality of college and the scope of empire, there was an international network that looked back to King's, which remained a special haven for them. Many of these men became figures who made significant contributions on the international stage. All archives are 'damaged', but the archive of homosexual experience is huge if carefully self-edited by the discretions of propriety, shame and legality. Heather Love sees in queer history 'nothing but wounded attachments'.[24] I am tempted to say that 'nothing but wounded attachments' sums up human interaction pretty well (which would give no priority to queer experience). And of course acknowledging the oppression and denigration which many queer people did and continue to experience is an absolutely necessary starting point for any history of homosexuality. But in this history we will also see love, friendship and care stretching over decades. Perhaps no relationship can escape its wounds, but there is also something at least beyond wounds that brings humans back together in hope and desire.

There are four chapters that follow, each with a central motivating question. Chapter 1, 'The Discovery of Homosexuality', focuses on the earlier years of this history and a group of men who found it very difficult to find themselves on the map of desire, to see where they stood in the normative world of Victorian erotics. They could not speak the vice that dare not say its name – though they

talked about it non-stop. How to be 'homosexual' before homosexuality? Or rather – and much more complicatedly – how did living through the shifts that the pathologisation of desire effected, change a sense of identity for these men who desired men – their self-understanding? Chapter 2, 'The Politics of Homosexuality', looks at a group of men who committed themselves to political change, and who did so fully in the knowledge that their own forms of desire gave them a different perspective on social norms and the possibilities of freedom from convention. Some aimed to change the world institutionally – through the foundation of the League of Nations, say; some through changing the physical environment of cities; others through transforming economic or political understanding; others still by working for government. The intensity of discussion in college transferred to an intense and committed contribution to the political life of the nation (and beyond). They wanted to create a world in which they would be happier to live. Chapter 3, 'The Art of Homosexuality', brings on stage a group of actors, musicians and artists, who set out to change the imagination of the community. Performance became an expression of queer identity because concealment and revelation, acting an other's role, were endemic strategies in the negotiation of conventional society by queer men. If the 'stylistics of living' can be a route into understanding the bio-politics of experience, here was a group of men who flaunted a stylistics of living to change the politics of the personal – to change how life could and should be pictured.[25] How is the art and the artist's life interlinked? The final chapter, Chapter 4, 'The Burial of Homosexuality', concentrates on the post-Second World

War period, when policing became even more fierce in Britain, and the return to a paraded social normality after the war created an even more hostile atmosphere for homosexual life, as it did for women in the public sphere. It is not by chance that this is the era when the Cambridge spies became notorious: concealment, playing a role, lying became a compelling necessity for gay men. Several of the fellows who appear in this chapter married. Yet in 1967, homosexual sex between men above the age of twenty-one in private was legalised, and although this immediately resulted in even more aggressive stances by public authorities, gradually, though scarcely at the same time across all communities and regions, things became a little easier for gay men, at least for some gay men, as pride marches, fighting back, legal developments and a changing public acceptance transformed the possibility of gay experience – as, differently, frighteningly, murderously, the AIDS epidemic had a profound effect on the lives – and deaths – of so many people, especially in major international cities. By the mid-1970s King's had a flourishing, flamboyant and open gay scene, which survived beyond the AIDS epidemic and the slow development of adequate medical treatments. Homosexuality, however, became a word less and less used, politically and socially. What had become a key term in the changing status of men who desired men was sidelined, buried. The book ends, somewhat mournfully, with one of the old dons of today looking back across these years, a reflection on change and loss, cued by the search for an alternative history of homosexuality – and his own failed hopes for an alternative history for himself.

As an undergraduate, I had spent many an evening in this don's rooms on H staircase, with friends, talking and

drinking. We have often reminisced together since, as the friends of those days continued to add new stories to our memories. I had been educated in an all-boys school, a day-school, where no boy to my knowledge then was openly – or for that matter secretly – homosexual (gay was not quite yet the term of art for us), and where, in accord with the public culture of the era, homosexuality was the prompt to insult or humour (the two responses connected by their obvious aggression and disavowal). 'To my knowledge' is not just a sign of the insecure ignorance of adolescence, but because the obvious aggression and disavowal made it so difficult for anyone to express anything but an insistently, performatively, masculine public face. It was consequently an eye-opening experience for me aged eighteen to enter a place where flaming queens screeched welcomes in the bar, where men talked avidly of sexual experiences with men, and women with women; where serious, more intense conversations about the politics of sexuality and the enactments of gender were commonplace; where feminist theory and gay liberation were part and parcel of engagement with the world. What was being acted out was a range of possibilities, but in an accepting and explorative way not yet experienced by me in my growing up, and not yet expected in the public media or indeed in the life of most of British society. The presence of public (and private but known) displays of differing forms of affection and desire came hand in hand with a certain social and intellectual porosity or fluidity or openness – the conditions for a genuine shared generosity (with enough argument to make it all feel critical and pressing). As we will see, this open-mindedness was – at its best – self-consciously part

of King's self-representation: a moment in a long history of a (self-)critical acceptance of difference. Potential breeds potential: seeing otherness becomes a way of exploring otherness within yourself. Which can be a painful and dismaying experience too: there was also a lot of anguish and confusion, including for those who were excluded from such openness, or who wished not to be exposed to it. Acknowledgement of otherness and active acceptance of difference certainly do not remove hierarchies, fears, anxieties or even cruelties.

Cambridge has a particular image in modern society, not just as one of the oldest and greatest universities in the world, but also as an enclave of upper-class white guys, who, thanks to films, books and folk-memory, appear as beautiful young men running around a courtyard or drinking in oak-lined rooms, taught by elderly men in gowns, who politic furiously. It is the back-drop for narratives about spies and athletes, murder stories and choirs. There are decent historical reasons for some of this image. For many of the decades of the story I am writing, the university was almost entirely male, largely drawn from the upper reaches of British society, and largely white; and, for most of the period, many of the undergraduates enjoyed a very unpressured academic time (except at exam season), which was much taken up with sports, socialising, and gentle reading under trees. There are consequently many stories – from Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* onwards, an Oxford version – of *not fitting in* and of policing the boundaries of belonging. Especially as the university opened up from the 1950s onwards, the sense of potential alienation has been carefully nourished in anticipation as much as in practice. There are no doubt

some people for whom Cambridge is still an entitlement (they are the frightening ones). But for most this is simply not true. It's rather that most people come up to Cambridge already prepared for social anxiety. How to fit in, what normal might be, how to behave, are the questions of adolescence, for sure, but bringing together a large group of young people from very different backgrounds in a place that has so many inherited expectations of snobbishness, intellectual brilliance, and simply being very different from home, is a recipe for a performative giddiness. Other people's apparent confidence, other people's stated discomforts, your own uncertainties combine to make the narrative of being an undergraduate a story of precarious belonging, especially in the opening months of being at Cambridge. Living up to Cambridge, living through Cambridge, living in Cambridge … Many students try out new forms of living and thinking (some resist any such transformation), many reimagine their sense of self, and many of them act it out, quietly or loudly. For me, arriving from North London, a Jew from a left-wing background, studying the counter-cultural choice of ancient Greek, besotted with theatre and poetry, the still dominatingly Christian Cambridge provided a confusing and thrilling potential for finding another way of making a life, another, transformative sense of self. The feeling that the moorings of a previous family life were shifting, along with the expectations of the social community I had inhabited, was both unsettling and frantic – and not wholly easy to look back at, now. But the feeling of surprise and change has never left me, however much I have become part of the establishment here. It is still the case that the people who seem to think themselves

simply at home, entitled to be in Cambridge, appear most off-putting to me.

It is also clear to me that I was drawn to others who felt this sense of unsettled and anxious excitement as intently as me. Queerness – it is essential to recognise for this book – is not the same thing as homosexuality, or so I take it to mean in at least some current usage. In the past, 'queer' has often been used to denote gay men especially, both lovingly and aggressively. In the usual way of fugitive language, which because of its changeability always has a certain untimeliness in it, queer is still sometimes used in this way: as a marker of those who define their identity through same-sex desire. (It is not possible, of course, to calibrate all its usages across all communities; and there is yet an effective and affective politics of reclaiming such a term …) But 'queerness' is also used in a more productive critical mode, which is important for how this book has taken shape. Homosexuality, as we have already said, is a pathology and a type that aims to define an identity. Between medical science, psychology, insult and stereotype, it offers both the lure of self-definition and the danger of denigration and dismissiveness, both towards oneself and towards others. Queerness, however, in this critical mode aims to capture something else. Queerness strives to name what can't quite be pinned down, the sense that *how* normal you are, or *how* perverse, *how* much you fit in or don't belong, remains a question – certainly to yourself and perhaps to others too. It makes sense to ask *how queer* in a way that it is far less coherent to ask 'how homosexual'. (We will meet homosexuals who do not have sex with anyone, and others who have sex with women. It is not challenged that they *are* homosexuals, by

themselves or by their friends.) There are times when queerness is still used these days, perhaps too easily, as a marker of a paraded identity – a claim to stand out rather than not to fit in. But one reason why I was happy to sit in the don's rooms talking personally is that it was a space where fitting in remained an exploratory question rather than a social demand – where identity was not so much a badge to be thrust at others, but a process to be tested. Against the privileged entitlements that Cambridge offered and the hostile conservatism of a wider society's expectations, perhaps it is no surprise that gays, lefty Jews (and other miscreants of racialised thinking), theatricals of all types, artists (and so on) found allies in each other. In *Queer Cambridge* I write about the men I have chosen to portray not so much because they are homosexuals, simply, but rather because they are queer. And that made H staircase for me – to a degree, uncertainly but pointedly, with different consequences, and different anxieties – a *shared space*.[26]

I wrote a few pages back that 'this is not an idealised or idealising narrative. It does not set out to imagine a homosexual society, a brotherhood, an elite cohort of lovers or any of the other familiar fantasies that have so often arisen from the oppressions and disappointments of the present.' That remains true. But I can't deny that I do think that there is an immense value in this promise of a porous, multiform, open-minded, (radically) open community. On the one hand, I know that my own values, understanding and sensibilities have been transformed by my experiences and friendships within such a community over many years (and still ongoing). How to live, Socrates' old enquiry, remains still the most pressing question.

An unexamined life isn't worth living (or so Socrates, who died for the idea, claimed), and the fissures of the self – for me at least – could not have been recognised without these encounters with differing ways of living, or, to be more precise, without the nourished expectation that such encounters with difference should require self-examination (rather than prurience or dismissiveness). Part of this book's motivation stems from the recognition that my own self-understanding has been shaped by the messy richness of these engagements with imagining other ways of finding not just pleasure but also flourishing or well-being or attentiveness. This experience has deeply affected how I care to live my life. On the other hand, so many imaginings of idealised communities – utopias – portray a society that does not change, made up of people who know their place, and where conflict, difference and transformation are absent. Plato's *Republic* is one such idealisation, which shows both the lure and the dangers of such totalitarian and authoritarian longing for stability, never fully undone by the ironic voice of Socratic persuasion. In this sense, the changing and messy community of King's College is certainly not *ideal*. But it is still possible to value deeply the way it handles some of its messiness with generosity and receptiveness to its differing perspectives. In today's political and social world, after the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the violence and hostility of political polarisation, and increasing social and economic division and divisiveness, vividly and horrifically expressed in racist and other forms of violence within cities, and in military aggression between countries, it is indeed compelling to relearn why such receptiveness and generosity might open doors to a more fulfilling social

negotiation of difference and conflict in the public sphere. What's more, universities across the world are faced by forces, internal and external, that are setting their face against such messy freedoms and generous critical acceptance of differing perspectives. This alternative history of homosexuality also aims to offer a microcosm of a much larger agenda about how we might want to inhabit our social space together.

The chapters that follow trace a broadly thematic rather than a biographical line. For what I hope are obvious reasons, I have decided not to concentrate on figures who are still alive, and to put something of a halt on the story when homosexuality becomes legal – though a look over that particular fence will also close the book. Together, these snapshots of lives – and they can here be no more than snapshots – provide a remarkable collage of a community in formation – and an alternative history of homosexuality.

I hope by the end it will have become clear why I think it needed writing.