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A Brief History of Nakedness

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Author:

Philip Carr-Gomm

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Joseph Melling

The history of nakedness deserves a serious history. For organised nudism or 'naturism' was a conscious movement initiated by Europeans at the end of the 19th century that has exerted a significant influence over society and politics in the wider world. This book is not that serious academic history. In one respect its aim is much more ambitious. For its author is a psychologist, psychotherapist and popular writer, guided by a strong commitment to libertarian values. In the manner of a Jungian auteur, he undertakes a polymath survey of attitudes to the naked body across thousands of years. Carr-Gomm retains an abiding interest in the magical, mystical and religious values that absorb the first third of his book as he takes us on a colourful caravan across the centuries of Asiatic and European history. These bright threads of experience show how the hippie culture of the 1960s followed well-established pathways of European spiritualism and ancient meditation in which various forms of nakedness featured as initiations into deeper truths. For Judaeo-Christian as well as Hindu mystics have used the naked body to bear witness to the virtues of poverty and chastity in their journey to virtue, whether Francis of Assisi barefoot in the snow or naked Quakers ranting in London streets during the English Revolution and Russian *doukhobours* marching across Canada in nude family groups to defend their faith.

Some of the best passages in *Brief History* are critical commentaries on cultural productions in theatre, opera, dance and sculpture during the past 50 years and Carr-Gomm reminds us that the body is rarely

allowed to be publicly naked and it is this public display of pubic genitalia and other unfamiliar organs that carry the potent capacity to shock and disturb the moral order of societies and to provoke a strong reaction to those protesting by means of public exposure. The most basic uncovering of our common bodily form has a capacity to corrode layers of cultural varnish in which bodies are invariably and inevitably clothed by communities, sorting its members by their dress as much as their demeanour. The author spends much of the text illustrating in copious photographs the situations in which the private parts of different persons affronted, shocked and amused the public audience at which such performances were directed. The heavy meaning of simple nakedness as much as the carnival of hilarity released by those 'coming out?', is suitably illustrated in a glut of different examples. The political mobilisation of sexual organs in play and replay is vitally involved in the stark and subtle ways in which cultural norms are challenged as men leap over cricket stumps and women strip in the face of a medical building. About nudism and naturism as an organised way of life less is said, though there is a succinct account of British activists during the 20th century and their links to the mystical circles around druidism and pagan revivals. Such activists often exhibited and retain a streak of puritanical sobriety that would hearten their Victorian forbears as well as the healthy-life advocates of the 1930s who George Orwell famously denounced as vegetarian cranks and 'back-stairs crawlers'. The amused contempt in which nudism is held changed surprisingly little in the later 20th century, even as the healthy practices, diet faddism and environmental awareness that the naturists pioneered have become universal habits of body and mind.

There are many opportunities to provide a more rigorous and vigorous history of the historic meanings of nakedness in European societies during the past two centuries, as this book offers occasional glimpses of civilisation's long battle with the body. The rich profusion of photographs included in this text suggest that much of the concern of artists and portraiture composers has been not so much with nakedness as with the allure of feminine and masculine beauty, bodies being contorted into idealised and eroticised postures and with the banality of the literal body-shell excluded from the interested gaze of the voyeur. As Bernard Shaw remarks in one of the telling quotes that litter the text, it is the restraint of provocative and repressive clothing rather than the arresting honesty of commonplace flesh that drives much of the intrigue around nudity.

The many facets of undressing the body are suggested in the discussion of Greek philosophy and the menagerie of mythical and legendary figures that have inhabited literary discourses for many centuries. The assumption that nakedness is equivalent to a primitive or natural state is writ large in encounters such as Robinson Crusoe with Man Friday, though the ambivalent attitudes of the cultured to the rudely nude could have been usefully framed by some reference to Rousseau and the Romantic movements of the 18th and 19th centuries. The politics of undressing demands a more careful account of legal regulation and the ways in which state servants (naked or otherwise) enforced legislation at key moments. It may be unfair in a general text to expect more than a selective commentary on some features of the nude self in Western literature since the Enlightenment, though the ambitious claims of this book goes beyond reflections on mere centuries or single continents. Should we not reasonably expect that Europe's contemplation of the exotic body in the lush colours of the Orient should be subjected to more critical scrutiny? It becomes irritating that there should be so little apparent effort to explain the movements and moments of history described so fleetingly in these colourful pages. There is a danger that the whole becomes less than the sum of the physical and cultural parts which are depicted vividly but disjointedly.

Approaching the historically naked is not an easy task. For people are not undressed by chance and the figures portrayed here are not those who are accidentally nude. Nothing may appear more obviously similar than the naked body but the unclothed can betray their social origins and national cultures almost as quickly as the dressed. Cues can be detected in postures of the period as much as the grooming and embellishment of the skin. Generational differences are found in conflicts between the authorities of older nudist colonies which prohibit all forms of flesh piercing and ornamentation, and younger members who bring the fashions of body modification common among Westernised youth from the late 20th century. The intentions of those who present themselves *in flagrante* are usually mixed and rarely obvious. Writing the history of the different movements which have contributed to the naked presence in modern society is clearly a

challenging task.

Some of the most impressive historical accounts of conscious nakedness have been written by political historians, concerned to locate the celebration of the body within the social history and the 'bio-politics' of modern Europe. (1) Important studies of German 'naked culture' have examined the youth revolt of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the spread of body-consciousness in the Weimar Republic. (2) It was the National Socialists' recognition that naked association was a feature of socialist and Communist politics which led to the suppression of nudist societies in the early Nazi era, before the fascists permitted a controlled resurgence of communal nakedness aligned with the reactionary body culture of the 1930s. Nudity was not the province only of right-wing mass parties in the interwar era but also figured in some anarchist and socialist political practice. (3) Communist regimes seeking to build their citizens' loyalty to new, often implausible, states in the post-War years also turned to regulated nakedness as a channel of healthy expression permitted by one-party regimes. (4) The body politics of workers' republics were graphically advertised in the healthy, frequently drug-fuelled, athletic figures who demonstrated in Olympic games and paraded alongside socialist missile carriers on the occasion of revolutionary celebrations in the streets of the Warsaw Pact countries and the capitals of other members of the world socialist family.

The relative paucity of historical research on British nudism is not simply a register of the comparative weakness of political engagement by the naked during the 20th century. There is a history of organised exposure to be uncovered by social, cultural and health historians. We can learn much about the nature and opinions of British nudists by examining the early efforts of nudist-practitioners to provide a historic narrative of their own origins and the philosophical tenets which guided these pioneers. Rex Wellby's outline notes on British nudism emphasises the impact of Heinrich Pudor's *Naked Man* (1893) and Richard Ungewitter's *Nakedness* (1905), though it was Marguerite Le Fur's French account of her visit to Germany which inspired Harold Clare Booth's writings on the 'Nude Culture Movement' in 1914'5 and his subsequent founding of the intellectual New Gymnosophy Society, whose bulletins of 1925'7 provided a basic foundation for a distinctive English middle-class egalitarian philosophy of nudism, though the Society's praxis remained self-selecting and highly elitist. (5)

Other key figures in English nudist campaigns whose views were formed during the First World War included H. Dyon Bingham, whose nom de plume 'Elan Vital' and 'Dionysius' suggests the strong Graeco-Roman as well as Germanic influences such as Hans Suren on the outdoor movement which include folk-life campers who wished to provide an alternative to regimented scouting in mobilizing youth enthusiasts. (6) The most intriguing and provocative figure in the British nudist movement was undoubtedly H. H. Vincent, who was briefly an 'Acting Captain' in the Army and thereafter maintained his army title as he proposed a radical agenda of direct action during the early 1920s, including frequent addresses at Hyde Park for which he was periodically arrested. Vincent's own brand of 'Sun Ray Club' organization achieved public notoriety for their defence of semi-nude bathing at Hendon reservoir in 1928, for which he was again pursued by the Metropolitan Police - there was strong popular resistance to the public bathers.

In view of the relentless attacks on Vincent and his followers, it seems strange that the advocates of sun bathing should have achieved what can only be described as a revolution in popular attitudes to bodily exposure to sunlight during the inter-war years, so that by 1939 advertisements for train and charabanc trips could feature the bronzed faces of carefree trekkers. Carr-Gomm's text gives us a few interesting clues as to why this transformation of popular culture occurred in a period marked by economic depression, mass unemployment, growing poverty and the resurgence of diseases due to vitamin deficiency such as rickets. The support of highly visible members of the medical profession such as Sir Arbuthnot Lane was important, though the brilliant maverick Dr. Caleb Williams Elijah Hans Saleeby had only uneven success in promoting the virtues of clean air and heliotherapy and advertising the achievements of the tuberculosis sanatoriums such as Dr Auguste Rollier's at Leysin. The National Sun and Air Association did little more than attract the interest a group of courageous intellectuals and lower-middle class professionals, while titillating the readers of popular newspapers which spied upon and mocked the private gatherings of such enthusiasts.

It was the more cautious advocacy of the healthy lifestyle and practical exercises for young and old by N. J.

Barford and his associates in the Sun Bathing Society of the early 1930s, along with endorsement by public figures such as George Bernard Shaw, which avoided the eccentricities and factionalism of the early nudist activists. Appealing to an undoubted drive towards 'outdoor' activities, a sympathetic press for lighter clothing and steady sunlight 'treatment', all helped to change clothing styles and to erode some of the class barriers which had been historically embroidered into British dress customs during the 19th century. Heavier cloths and tight tunics gave way to lighter and more revealing fashions for mass market items as well as privileged *chic*. Sunlight was one of the active agents of a more egalitarian consumer society, at least for those with the resources for some recreation in a period of intense deprivation for significant minorities. Nor should we separate too readily the dedication of political commitment and the diverse movements to claim a public space for enjoyment. As the famous battles around the Kinder Scout trespass campaign indicates, struggles for rights of way and the public enjoyment of land too readily engrossed by private landlords could acquire a sharp political edge in the 1930s.

While the nudist campaigners of these decades may have been undeservedly neglected, there remains the fundamental truism that organized nakedness never became a mass movement in Britain or the United States in the way that it did in some parts of Europe during the first half of the 20th century. Once again *A Brief History of Nakedness* does little to articulate this problem though it does provide some tantalising clues as to how we might begin to explain the puzzle of a national reluctance to go starkers at key moments in history when large numbers of continentals went for public disclosure. One explanation must lie in the subject of the opening chapters of this book: namely, the influence of religious beliefs and attitudes to the untrammelled body. Not only the larger churches but Nonconformist sects such as the Methodists were slow to approve of bodily indulgences, though it can be argued that the allotment movement (another important feature of the early 20th century) offered the dignity of outdoor labour to such conscientious Christians. In other settings, such as the communities founded by the Tolstoyian faithful of the Cotswolds, religious faith and mysticism could be coupled with radical nudism. Perhaps too much has been made of the hold which Wicca, druidry, black magic and paganism held over the nudist movement in the middle decades of the century. Christian ethics also permitted nakedness as well as vegetarianism and water temperance for some true believers at this period.

Organised communities and holiday camps of nudists in England were concentrated in the 'Hertfordshire Nuderies' near St Albans. Their numbers declined during the Second World War as younger males and many females were called up for active service. One of the most celebrated commercial nudist ventures, directed by the Mackaskie family, survived by taking in refugees from Blitz-threatened London. Provincial societies in the cooler climes of Yorkshire and Lancashire similarly survived the early 1940s with some difficulties but benefited from some resurgence of interest in the post-War years when family nudism became a significant element in the growing movement south of London. During the 1950s British nudism probably reached its peak in membership and its relative decline in the years of sexual liberation during the 1960s and 1970s suggests once again its distinctive historical roots and formation, apparently out of touch with popular secular tastes and impressions and yet offering a progressive lead on many issues of sexual and personal equality. By the time the beat and hippie cultures depicted so vividly by Carr-Gomm arrived, the sandal-wearing nudists hardly appeared as prophets of the cool generation. Far from walking on the wild side, they seem to have spent their lives on a different road.

This book comes with claims to being a beautiful text about beautiful people. One defence for the remarkable support offered by some notable writers on the dust jacket of this book is that the author conveys his subject in an accessible and fluent style that takes the reader into the extraordinary diversity of the nude. The frame that holds up the body of the text remains too weak and the folds of description are too flabby. The author may be himself a victim of the digital age for this is the first book I have reviewed which seems to have been written by a Googler. The references are held together by a racy eye for the good story and we are carried along by the entertaining anecdotes. At the end of the ride we are left with little more than vapour trails from the different search engines and little idea how to interpret the spectacle that has flown past us. Philip Carr-Gomm has helped to take the history out from under the counter of serious scholarship but only taken it as far as the stylish coffee table. This book will catch the interest of the general reader but we need

more substance to engage the roving eye of the serious historian.

Notes

1. Edward Ross Dickinson, 'Biopolitics, fascism, democracy: some reflections on our discourse about 'Modernity''? *Central European History* 37, 1 (2004), 1-48, 4-6 and passim cites the work of Sander Gilman as well as Foucault.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Chad Ross, *Naked Germany: Health, Race and the Nation* (Oxford, 2005), especially pp. 67-100, for medicinal aspects of naked culture and sun-worship.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Evert Peeters, 'Authenticity and asceticism: discourse and performance in nude culture and health reform in Belgium, 1920-1940?' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, 2 (2006), 422-61, and also Richard Sonn, 'Your body is yours?: anarchism, birth control, and eugenics in interwar France?' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, 4 (2005), 415-32 for European Catholic campaigning on these issues as well as anarchist ideas also explored in Richard Cleminson, 'Making sense of the body: anarchism, nudism and subjective experience?' *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 81, 6 (2004), 697-716.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For post-fascist body exposure politics Josie McLellan, 'State socialist bodies: East German nudism from ban to boom?', *Journal of Modern History* 79 (2007), 48-79, 58-62 for politicisation of naked bathing after the defeat of Nazism.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Rex Wellbye (Ancton Toqvor), 'The Story of Nudism?' articles, 'The birth of English nudism?' and 'Nudism put on the map?', pp. 14-77, British Naturism Archives.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. George L. Moss, 'Nationalism and respectability: normal and abnormal sexuality in the nineteenth century?', *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, 2 (1982), 221-46, 233-9 for youth movement and also emergence of sexology. Adam Clapham and Robin Constable, *As Nature Intended. A Pictorial History of the Nudists* (London, 1982), pp. 28-30 for Hans Suren. Michael Hau, *The Culture of Health and Beauty in Germany: a Social History 1890-1930* (Chicago, IL, 2003) also discusses Suren.[Back to \(6\)](#)

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/may/30/brief-history-nakedness-carr-gomm> [2]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/7771639/A-Brief-History-of-Nakedness-by-Philip-Carr-Gomm-review.html> [3]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/a-brief-history-of-nakedness-by-philip-carrgomm-2009628.html> [4]

Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/10e7f50e-a0eb-11df-badd-00144feabdc0.html> [5]

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