

individual lives. *Telling Lives* reveals a kaleidoscope of life histories that individualizes individuals, maps the criss-crossing of social, political and economic forces and sets up an interesting dialogue between the texts themselves.

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ANTONY COPLEY:

A Spiritual Bloomsbury: Hinduism and Homosexuality in the Lives and Writing of Edward Carpenter, E. M. Forster, and Christopher Isherwood.

xi, 397 pp. Lanham MD and Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006.
\$30.95. ISBN 978 0 7391 1465 0.

Antony Copley has made his name as a historian of modern Indian political and religious movements, and as a biographer of Gandhi and Rajagopalachari; but his cultural interests have always ranged very widely. His first book was a study of sexual moralities in France from the revolutionary period to the 1980s, and in this intriguing new study of the nexus between homosexuality, mysticism and Hinduism he again shows a willingness to enter territory that more strait-laced historians (especially in India) might choose to avoid. The question that his book immediately throws up is: is there such a nexus? You can be homosexual, mystically inclined and interested in Hinduism, but is there necessarily a connection between the three? By focusing on three highly individual figures, Copley shows that for them there was indeed a connection – one that partly derived from the pressures of being homosexual in an age when it was still against the law. Whether in the present age of civil partnerships the connections would be anything like so clear is open to question.

Of his three chosen figures, E. M. Forster is perhaps the easiest to analyse. Not only has his homosexual career in India been extensively and wittily covered by P. N. Furbank in his superb biography (1977), it has also long been apparent that the eccentric world of the Indian princely states offered Forster an escape from social conventions that he personally found so stifling. Copley's main contribution in his study is to show how Forster's direct contact with Vaishnavism – his experience in particular of the festival of Krishna's birth in Dewas that was the source of the "Temple" section of *A Passage to India* – opened up a world of male identification with the feminine, transvestism and saturnalian revelry that was deeply liberating for him. His humanism and agnosticism prevented him from going the whole way towards "annihilation of the self", but Copley acknowledges "the extraordinary degree to which Forster did open himself, emotionally and imaginatively, to the Krishna cult. The dictates of his sexuality took him a long way to experiencing its extraordinary vitality".

Christopher Isherwood, younger than Forster, able through the lifestyle he adopted – first in pre-war Berlin and later in California – to be more openly gay, and less repressed in his fiction than Forster (except in the privately circulated *Maurice*) felt able to be, made a more determined effort to embrace Hindu mysticism than Forster ever did. Indeed, Isherwood's interest in India was limited to his personal religious struggle: his adoption of Swami

Prabhavananda as his guru, his co-translation with him of the *Bhagavad Gita* (1951), his highly personal study of *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (1965), and his moving late Vedantist novel *A Meeting by the River* (1967) were, Copley argues, linked to his “adversarial attitude toward both his homosexuality and his mother”. Prevented by his ego and his sexual needs from ever achieving Vedantist non-duality, he might have been a happier man if he had never embarked on the quest. But Copley sees a positive gain: “his already considerable capacity for self-detachment was greatly heightened. He became a far more scrupulous and mordant observer of human vanity”.

Edward Carpenter – the third figure in the book but discussed first – is harder for the reader to get a handle on than Forster or Isherwood, partly because his prolix and, frankly, crankish writings are little read today, but also because his personal involvement with India arose from his relationship with a guru less well known (outside Sri Lanka) than Isherwood’s Prabhavananda. Through Ponnambalam Arunachalam, a Sri Lankan friend he made at Cambridge in the 1870s and who became a major political figure in early twentieth-century Sri Lanka, Carpenter was introduced to Ramaswamy, also known as Ilakanam the Grammarian, with whom he conversed for more than a month, towards the end of 1890. The Tamil saiva-siddhanta tradition he encountered through him was then grafted on to the much more hedonistic and pantheistic outlook he had absorbed from Walt Whitman (an earlier guru), to emerge as a flamboyant philosophy of sexual mysticism that ran in parallel with the pioneering sexology of Carpenter’s friend, Havelock Ellis. It is easy to snigger at some of the titles of Carpenter’s books – *Love’s Coming of Age* (1896) or *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) – or at the sandal-wearing “neo-pagan” court he kept at Millthorpe in Derbyshire; but there was considerable personal courage in the ménage he set up with George Merrill and in the campaigns he pursued with Havelock Ellis for sexual toleration and reform. How much did Carpenter’s ideas owe, in the end, to India? Probably the most important Indian lesson he learned – one that fed through to D. H. Lawrence, the hippies of the 1960s and today’s New Ageists – is that body and spirit need not be separated or opposed to one another. Copley quotes and agrees with Sheila Rowbotham, Carpenter’s biographer, that “Eastern religious thought seemed to provide an alternative which avoided materialism and the Christian hierarchical dualism of spirit and matter. In the east they seemed to have found a place for pleasure without shame and a more easy relationship between mystical ecstasy and physical eroticism than in the West”.

This gives a much greater centrality to Copley’s study than its title might initially suggest, and it is a pity it was not published by a major academic press (one that would also have ironed out the many misprints that disfigure the book). Outsiders his three figures may all, in their different ways, have been, but as so often happens in cultural history, ideas that are initially on the margins can move towards the centre and eventually become mainstream.

One should add that a very entertaining bonus is Copley’s own “Extracts from a diary of the visit to India 1999”, which occupies the final 80 pages. It provides the background to his research, but also puts him in the illustrious company of the devotees of India who are the subject of his book.

William Radice