

Cold comfort?

Annebella Pollen, author of a new book on the visual history of naturism, reflects on her unusual research journey...



ANY RESEARCHER WHO WANTS TO EXAMINE THE HISTORY OF NATURISM IN THE BRITISH LIBRARY

WILL FIND THEMSELVES ASSIGNED TO A PROTECTED SECTION OF THE RARE BOOKS READING ROOM, KNOWN COLLOQUIALLY AS “THE NAUGHTY TABLE”. Here, scholars accessing historic books containing nude photographs must enter an “invigilation area” and be overseen, at all times, by a designated librarian. Naturist publications are marked “Special Material” and come with a large yellow tag stating “No Photography”.

This was my experience when I began to research my new book, *Nudism in a Cold Climate*. The situation both niggled me and tickled me. I found it bothersome because it made access to sources more difficult, and it seemed to wrongly classify naturist publications as smutty. I also found it ironic, given the subject I was researching.

Other researchers before me had been subject to the same suspicion. In his 1963 book, *Mrs Grundy: Studies in English Prudery*, for example, Peter Fryer complained of the difficulty of accessing material marked “Private” in the British Museum and noted that the Principal Keeper of the Department of Printed Books said its purpose was to contain what he called “indiscriminate browsing in the field of erotica”. Early nudists and nudism supporters had similar gripes. More than a hundred years ago, Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis described the library’s limitations as a brake on serious scholarship.

Archives

In the 21st century, however, “browsers in the field of erotica” have access, at their fingertips, to a much racier body of material than is held on British Library shelves. A researcher of naturism’s history also has many other places to look. I’ve been warmly welcomed into the extensive organisational archives of British Naturism, and I’m lucky enough to live with a second-hand dealer who specialises in ephemera and magazines, sourced from the attics and sheds of house clearances. Through these abundant sources, I’ve accessed a huge range of printed and visual matter on the subject, including the full back catalogue of *Health and Efficiency* magazine, now of course *H&E naturist*.

Nudism in a Cold Climate is a study of naturism in Britain from the early 1920s to the early 1970s, covering the very earliest of tentative discussions to the full acceptance (with caveats) of the nude body in public culture. I've followed naturism's paper trail through its books and periodicals, and through the public and private archives of the photographers who provided naturist illustrations. As a researcher of visual culture, I've been particularly interested in how debates about the nude photograph in Britain intersected with nudism as a practice. Nude photographs were used to portray the ideals of the movement and to attract readers to magazines, but they were also a cause of endless controversy. As the British Library's ban on taking photographs of naturist books showed, this continues today.

Naturist books and magazines offer a unique view on British cultural history

In my book, I explore how debates about nude imagery played out in naturist photographs, which embodied ideas about morality and artistry, and in the pages of naturist books and magazines, where there was frequent tension between the commercial agendas of the publishers and the perspectives of practising nudists. Photographers for early naturist magazines included eminent portraitists of the Royal Family and documentary photographers with communist agendas. They were also, at times, undercover producers of striptease films and gay erotica. Models could be genuine naturists of all ages and sizes, but they could also be buff bodybuilders and shipped-in showgirls.

Naturist publications from the 1920s to the 1970s were bought and read by a much wider range of readers than naturists alone, and their surveyors included the police. In the book, I explore not only photographs, books and magazines, but also court papers from legal cases that show how nude practices and philosophies played out in the dock and in related anti-censorship campaigns.



The naturist ideal: East Midland Sunfolk, 1951

At the same time as naturism was consolidating as a movement in mid-20th-century Britain, the range of places where the nude photograph could be seen and sold was expanding. Nudes appeared in art galleries and in books of photographic tuition. What made the naturist nude different? Questions about who should be pictured, and how, illuminate attitudes about bodies and health, gender and class, sexuality and ethnicity in a period of rapid cultural and social change in Britain.

Censorship

Of course, the debates are not wholly resolved by the early 1970s, when my study ends. Contemporary censorship on Facebook and Instagram, for example, where nude images are subject to a blanket ban, show that there are many continuities over the last hundred years. And, of course, naturism continues as an organised practice. There is still much to say about what has changed over the subsequent fifty years, from the early 1970s to the present day, ►



but I leave that for others to take on. This is a period best covered by those with inside experience.

Although I am not a naturist, my many years of reading naturist publications have taught me that naturists are a neglected source of authority on many matters. Naturist books and magazines offer a unique view on British cultural history, challenging its norms as well as confirming its conventions. The material is special, but not for the reasons that make British Library staff so anxious. Its revelation of social attitudes is more potent than its revelation of nude bodies.

After many years as a researcher of its pages, I'm delighted to now be writing for *H&E* and I'm particularly grateful to the magazine's publisher, Sam Hawcroft, for her generous permission to use photographs from back issues in the book. *Nudism in a Cold Climate* not only researches the content of naturist print culture, but also incorporates elements of its style into the design, from adverts for health products on its inside pages to the folding "belly band" that conceals and reveals its naked cover star. As the published book, packed with nude photographs, now enters the shelves of the British Library, it may even end up, in turn, as restricted material on the reading room naughty table.

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**Now
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Fascinating history: *Naked – as Nature Intended* (1961), top; *Spielplatz* in 1948, above; *Nudist Paradise* (1959), below



Two of our regular contributors offer their thoughts on the book...

Nudism in a Cold Climate: The Visual Culture of Naturists in Mid-20th-Century Britain

by **Annebella Pollen**

Published by Atelier Editions, priced £30, ISBN 9781733622066

The 1920s seems the ideal period in which to begin this study, as it was then that we saw not only a proliferation of books and magazines on the subjects but the first real “nudist camps”. Inside and outside naturism, however, people agonised over what should be shown, and some even argued for no images at all.

“What should nudists wear?” sounds odd, but reflected the debate on complete nudity. A sensible *Health and Efficiency* article at the time said: “The idea is completely defeated if you have a thread of clothing on you.”

Then as now, the gender imbalance was bemoaned, with restrictions at naturist venues such as men having to be accompanied by women or children, and cheaper rates for women. Class also reared its head, with stringent screening supposedly designed to maintain moral standards, but also evaluating social position.

One thing which has changed greatly is attitudes to the depiction of children, as shown by some of Pollen’s photos. There was no discussion of the propriety of such images and, incredible as it now seems, there were even schools where both sexes mixed naked.

The old chestnut of using professional models and actors also comes up. The innocence of the times (1959) was shown in the surprise expressed when a queue of 100 men formed to see what is generally considered to be the first naturist film, *Nudist Paradise*. Two years later came perhaps the most famous naturist film of the era, *Naked – as Nature Intended*, and the book includes the iconic photo of the stars at Spielplatz, complete with strategically placed towels and bags.

The long and sorry saga of police action over images that now look totally innocuous is also described, as are two other important aspects of the naturist story: the often poor treatment of homosexuality, and racial attitudes which now, rightly, seem appalling.

Pollen’s perceptive text concludes that the normalisation of naturist visual culture has been achieved, and the agonising over definition settled by BN’s simple “the practice of going without clothes”.

Ray Ward

As her book’s subtitle makes clear, Annebella Pollen’s primary interest here is imagery. However, I think she is the first to cover British naturism itself in significant detail and with all sources cited. She could have kept such material to the bare minimum needed for her survey of photographs in magazines and the like, but instead has provided a thoroughly researched narrative giving full context.

Pollen is not a naturist, but her introduction details experiences of nudity including life modelling and as a sky-

clad pagan. Thus, she describes herself as “both a nude sympathiser of sorts and an inhabitant of the enemy position as a ‘textile’” – complementing her academic’s desire for objectivity.

It is in coverage of the early 1930s that Pollen’s story really takes off, as this was when some of Britain’s many health-focused magazines became wholeheartedly naturist in philosophy, and some new titles with that ethos were launched.

Mass-market print publication of photographs had become common, using the halftone process. Newspaper pictures offered modest resolution on dull paper, but some magazines – and most books – used greater resolution and glossy paper to offer much greater contrast. I think it is unfortunate therefore that Pollen’s book has no pages of the latter type, and many of the plentiful images appear duller than in their original publications.

That quibble aside, I cannot fault Pollen’s range and selection of material, nor her exposition of its sources and characteristics. Among the issues she considers are the preponderance of young women with (supposedly) ideal faces and figures, as most were professional models.

She also details the way that naturist magazines frequently carried articles and letters condemning glamour magazines, even though the latter used many of the same photographers and models – who often also produced material for the prestigious “fine art” photography market.

Of the photos taken at clubs, many included children. Pollen worries about issues of consent and exploitation, particularly given the presumption that many men bought the magazines for self-stimulus. One can review aspects such as this thanks to the book’s excellent index (e.g. 16 entries for “children – photographic representation of” and five for “masturbation”).

Pollen reminds us that, for almost all the period covered, not only were male homosexual acts illegal, but homophobia was intrinsic to British culture. This influenced the types of male figure and pose used for the few images featuring men, in contrast to imagery in non-naturist health titles, which unsurprisingly gloried in oiled and well-developed muscles.

The book includes more than a dozen photos showing club naturists sitting down. Only five show people sitting on towels, and all are on the grass: none of those sitting on chairs are using towels. Pollen doesn’t mention this non-compliance with current naturist practice, and doesn’t attempt to define “naturist photography” or even to suggest there might be such a genre. But she has succeeded superbly in her review of naturists’ publication and consumption of images in their magazines, books and booklets over a significant half-century. Highly recommended.

Tim Forcer

