

‘The most curious’ of all ‘queer societies’? Sexuality and Gender in British Woodcraft

Camps, 1916-2016

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In the years during and after the Great War, disaffected with the apparent militarism and imperialism of Boy Scouts, British pacifists established rival outdoor youth organisations. These new organisations returned to some of the founding ideas of Scouting in the form of the ‘woodcraft’ system of outdoor education pioneered at the turn of the twentieth century by Ernest Thompson Seton and latterly absorbed into Baden-Powell’s organisation. To these ideas each of the new organisations--the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, and Woodcraft Folk--added their own distinctive philosophies, drawing on psychology, spirituality, art and politics, to provide idiosyncratic camping experiences across genders and ages. Camp in this context was more than leisure, and more than an escape from encroaching industrialisation--it was a personally and socially transformative space, rich with utopian possibility.

The British woodcraft movement’s subversions represent a distinctive and elaborate queering of the Boy Scout ideal. Through their futurist visions and revivalist performances, members acted out their radical ideals for a hybrid new/old world. Alongside these activities, each group developed detailed and sometimes unorthodox ideas about “sex instruction” and “sex equality” interlinked with complex theories of camping. As such, new ideas about social relationships ran through woodcraft organisations’ vision and were played out under canvas. In the temporary worlds of primitivist camps in the heady period of change after the Great War, alternatives to so-called civilised life could be tried on for size. Gender and sexuality became prime sites where the limits of experimental practices were tested and contested, and aspects of these challenges continue in the organisations’ twenty-first century manifestations.

Through an investigation of woodcraft theories and practices, this essay examines the movement as a case study of oppositional ideals in the interwar period, when camping and experiments in living intertwined. While woodcraft organisations in Britain have always been much smaller in scale than numbers of Scouts and Guides, and their founding ideas were far from mainstream, their position as aspiring cultural revolutionaries meant that they inhabited a space--literally and figuratively--as outsiders. This essay presents views from the three most prominent woodcraft organisations, each founded during or shortly after the Great War. The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry was the first pacifist coeducational breakaway from Scouts. Founded in 1916, it was at its most productive in the 1920s and 1930s with public projects including the progressive Forest School for children, and Grith Fyrd craft training camp for unemployed men. The organisation recently celebrated its centenary as a very small cluster of descendants of early members. The flamboyant, artistic Kindred of the Kibbo Kift was established as an all-ages, mixed-gender alternative to Scouts in 1920 but only lasted just over a decade as a woodcraft organisation before being radically remodelled into an economic campaign group (The Green Shirts) and latterly a short-lived political party (The Social Credit Party of Great Britain and Ireland). Finally, Woodcraft Folk was founded in 1925 following a schism in Kibbo Kift over political direction; it continues to thrive as an outdoor-focused and democratic organisation with around 15,000 adult and child members in groups spread across the UK.

Camping as an Oppositional Practice

Camping may seem to be an innocuous leisure activity, merely providing a low-budget holiday; as such it could be of little social or political consequence. Yet camping has also been described as essentially socialist in character. In G. A. Cohen's analysis, as a system based on collective property and mutual giving, camping demonstrates in miniature "that society-wide socialism is equally feasible and equally desirable" (11). Camps are

clearly diverse in their organisation and ideologies, but they have nevertheless been characterised as extraordinary and exceptional places; as philosopher Giorgio Agamben has put it, the camp is “a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order” (1). For their capacity to stand outside conventional social structures, camps have become utilised for protest and as sites where the building blocks of society can be symbolically deconstructed and remade. Angela Feigenbaum, Fabian Frenzel, and Patrick McCurdy, for example, have argued that the collective nature of camps has been particularly effective in forging “communities of understanding”. In their conception, camp is a “unique structural, spatial and temporal form that shapes those who live, work, play and create within it” (8). A further essential aspect of camp--its transitory nature--necessarily results a shift in everyday practices. To use the anarchist Hakim Bey’s terminology, camps encapsulate a “temporary autonomous zone” where intentional communities can form “pirate utopias”. The temporary nature of camping allows for the suspension of norms and the trying on of new worlds for size. As camping historian Matthew de Abaitua writes, “Camping promises nothing permanent. It is a way of trafficking between what was and what could yet be” (60).

The romantic promise of camping has long held an allure for reformers at odds with the modern world. Since the writings of Henry David Thoreau in the mid-nineteenth century, a substantial body of literature has been produced in Britain and America espousing the ostensibly moral value of withdrawing from urban life with only the most basic means of survival on hand. Full of motifs of savages, Indians, gypsies and the like, such discourse contains much that can be critiqued as privileged colonial fantasy, but the experience of going back to the land clearly had (and has) anti-establishment potential. The “pastoral impulse”, as Jan Marsh has described it, was particularly prevalent from the 1880s in Britain among socialist campaigners, who saw the countryside disappearing from view and reconfigured it as an idea. ‘Country’ became an oppositional and idealised space in positive

relationship to the rapidly expanding, polluted and industrialised city (Williams). For those late Victorian reformers who campaigned for all-round social improvement, new enthusiasms for cycling, hiking, and camping were part of a broader urge for the simplification of life. Campaigns for fresh air and radiant health were a core part of these left-wing desires, which aimed to reform all aspects of life, from new ways of eating and dressing to new forms of social relationships.

Key proponents of these lifestyles, which espoused anti-industrial and alternative causes from vegetarianism and self-sufficiency in food production to the revival of handicrafts, included John Ruskin, William Morris and Edward Carpenter. Carpenter in particular offers a bridge between the late nineteenth-century practices and their manifestation among alternative youth organisations in the 1920s. Carpenter's writings were wide and included transcendental poetry, tracts denouncing industrial civilisation as a social ill, and those promoting a wide variety of loving relationships, including same-sex, unconstrained by convention (Rowbotham). For his pioneering ideas and lifestyle--he maintained an openly gay relationship with his working-class lover George Merrill at their smallholding in the north of England--Carpenter became something of a guru among the socialists and feminists who were challenging convention across a range of causes, in particular in relation to the emerging discipline of sexology.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Carpenter, and his friend and colleague, the physician Havelock Ellis, became figureheads for the emergent 'sexual science' informed by new psychological studies, which aimed to take seriously a wide range of sexual experiences and to develop a new vocabulary for their understanding. In the context of highly-charged anxieties about "degeneration" and "deviance", prostitution and venereal disease, the radical position of sex reformers on abortion, divorce and same-sex relationships remained far from mainstream. As Alison Oram notes, interest in sexology in the years up to

the Great War was not respectable, and was largely confined to intellectual elites and “radical fringe groups” (219). In this context, it is clear to see that woodcraft organisations, especially in relation to their role with children, were unusual in having frank “sex-instruction” built into their educational programmes.

The extent to which these practices can be described as a form of queering depends on one’s understanding of the term. As an expansive definition, David Halperin has argued that queer is “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (62). As I will argue, while British woodcraft organisations may not have been exclusively concerned with sexual behaviour, let alone what might be understood as queer sexual behaviour, their activities nonetheless challenged conventional approaches to sexuality as part of their broader challenge to social norms. In thinking of woodcraft organisations as queer, I draw on Matt Houlbrook’s argument that “thinking queer” is a historical methodology. As such, it moves away from simply seeking to restore an LGBT history; instead it performs the work of critical history in disturbing categories. Houlbrook applies this method to interwar Britain, a period that he characterises as one of “massive social, economic, cultural and political upheaval” (135), when emergent attempts to characterise and pathologise sexual orientations, roles and practices were particularly insecure. The examples that Houlbrook examines are, like woodcraft organisations, studies of transgressive behaviour that resist cultural convention. He persuasively argues, “thinking queer is too useful to be confined to the study of the queer” (136).

Sex and Gender in Woodcraft Organisations in the Interwar Period

I. O. Evans, a former Scout and latterly an enthusiastic member of several woodcraft organisations, compiled a book of the philosophies and practices of the British woodcraft movement in 1930, which included a chapter outlining woodcraft approaches to sex. Evans summarised that, until recent years, youths had only “ignorant filthy gossip” for guidance,

leaving them “to blunder experimentally amidst the most frightful perils.” He added, happily, that this period was on its way out, and noted, significantly, that “its passing synchronises with the rise of Woodcraft” (177). To Evans, woodcraft organisations were at the fore of open-mindedness. Sex education in organisations such as the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry and Kibbo Kift, was “very thorough-going”. By contrast, he noted Baden-Powell’s alarmist attitude to “self-abuse” and how Scouts’ “reactionary” attitudes to gender segregation was shared by the Guides. Both organisations held that gender mixing was “most undesirable” and that gender separation should be “strictly enforced” (178).

Woodcraft organisations formed in opposition to Scouts put mixed-gender camping at the heart of their project. Reassuring those who feared a loosening of morals as a result of intermingling, Evans noted, “the standard of behaviour in coeducational Woodcraft groups is remarkably high” (185). Any who engaged in sexual misconduct, Evans believed, would surely be expelled. He also noted, amusingly, that mixed camping is hardly “sexually exciting” (180). Should “morbid sex-cravings” emerge, the best solution, he proposed, is “an honourable love affair”. He even went so far as to suggest that a socially concerned and morally keen woodcrafter would make a more “devoted lover” (181).

In this, Evans was not advocating sex before marriage; that would be beyond the pale in organisations that courted, at least some of the time, public respectability. In Evans’s summaries, conventional approaches to marriage and parenthood were enshrined in woodcrafters’ eugenically-informed attitudes to the development of the human race (in this context meaning the positive development of healthy bodies across generations rather than sterilisation of the so-called ‘unfit’). For all of their relatively open-minded approaches to sex education and gender equality, Evans nonetheless expected woodcraft relationships to be “innocent” and chaste. Perhaps playfully, he concluded that it was possible for “the two sexes” to “camp in adjacent tents as safe from improper behaviour as though encased in iron

armour and chained to the ground, they dwelt behind walls and locked doors in camps miles apart from one another and with an angel with a flaming sword standing between” (186).

Despite Evans’s idealistic overview, sex education, gender segregation and gender roles played out rather differently on the ground and under canvas in woodcraft organisations.

The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry

The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry was founded in 1916 by British Quakers. Ernest Westlake, an amateur geologist, and his son, Aubrey, a doctor and conscientious objector who had run Scout groups as a form of public war service, combined their shared interests in nature, progressive education and classical poetry into an organisation that they felt offered a more imaginative and less militaristic camp experience (Edgell). They did this by returning to the ideas of Ernest Thompson Seton, a British-born, American-resident youth leader whose turn-of-the-century Woodcraft Indians scheme had inspired Baden-Powell. The Order adapted elements from Seton to create a system that took the English knight rather than the Native American as its mythic ideal, and which included adults as well as children, and girls as well as boys. Based from 1920 at Sandy Balls, their private campground on the edge of the New Forest, the group’s colourful, ceremonial camp practices attracted thousands of members in the interwar years.

The group was committed to outdoor life, a belief in the capacity of children to self-govern, and a biologically-inspired developmental model of recapitulation, popularised by child psychologist G. Stanley Hall. This scheme--shared in the 1920s by all woodcraft organisations--proposed that children should perform, or recapitulate, all successive stages of cultural evolution, from the undeveloped ‘primitive’ to a ‘civilised’ maturity. Order members developed distinctive schemes for the theory’s application, both in the progressive schools that were organised along woodcraft lines, and in their extensive literature. This was informed by intellectual inspirations from the “New Psychology” of Freud and Jung to

Quakerism, the mystic science of Neo-Vitalism, classical myths, symbolism and poetry. The Order believed that profound social, cultural and spiritual change was needed to correct the multiple ills of war-torn society. Militarism, materialism and mass pleasures were destabilising modern life and only a return to the best of the past could consolidate the new future they intended to shape. To this end, the Order designed folk-revival dress, regalia and language to be used in group ceremonies and camps. These were structured not just to provide social gatherings but to model a new way of life.

As with all woodcraft organisations, camping was an essential transformational activity. Ernest Westlake argued that “civilisation”--modern, urban life--had made daily experience too comfortable (72). Camping was a practical and moral re-education in simplicity and hardihood. Significantly, it was far from the corruption of the city, characterised as the root of all evil. Camping was also particularly important for young people. Order member Dorothy Revel argued, for example, “Motor cars, telephones, wireless sets, central heating, and other expensive adult luxuries are absolutely out of their place for children.” She argued, “They need to know the basic necessities of life [...]. They want earth-contact” (*Woodcraft Discipline*, 14-15). A 1928 Order publication argued that camping was a symbolic ritual through which utopian ideals could be realised. Its author, Dr. H. D. Jennings White, noted, “I am a member of the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry because I see in it the germs of an organisation for the conscious creation of superhumanity” (13). This vision was a moral, physical and spiritual rebirth; nothing less than “the creation of a new race of men here on earth, with the light of science in their eyes; with the love of beauty in their hearts; with order, control, and foresight in their actions; with a vitality and health in their bodies which we have never felt and can but dimly imagine; and with a spirit more tolerant, more daring, and more gracious than we shall ever have” (13).

Alongside its extensive writings on camping, the Order explored personal development. The membership was well-disposed to examine such issues as it boasted psychiatrists, medical practitioners and radical educators among its leading figures. How these ideologies might be combined with children's activities was hotly debated, particularly among more conservative members who saw the Order as a wholesome outdoor venture to implement new practical educational ideals, and the progressives who saw the Order as a crucible for radical life experiments. These debates crystallised around theories of nudism, sex reform, and sex education for children.

The first controversy focused on Harry "Dion" Byngham, a natural health journalist and mystic disciple of Blake, Whitman, and Nietzsche. Like many in the early days of the Order, Byngham was excited by the myths of the Ancient Greek Bacchae, whose ecstatic revels, he felt, offered a template for living a joyous life close to the earth. The Order's visual symbol was the Bacchae's Thyrsus, a phallic ivy-wreathed wand topped with a pine cone. Byngham's application of Dionysian ideas challenged the organisation's attempts at respectability. For example, his advocacy of gymnosophy, or social nudism, resulted in risqué articles and naked photography of Byngham and his girlfriend as pan pipe-playing nymphs in the pages of *The Pine Cone*, the official Order journal. Byngham's cohabitation before marriage was also a source of consternation. His last hurrah involved dancing naked with his lover as the embodiment of ecstasy in front of representatives of the national press. For this flagrant challenge to sexual propriety, Byngham was ultimately expelled (Edgell).

Another prominent and controversial member was the aforementioned Jennings White, a psychologist and one of several Order members of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology. Historian Lesley Hall has explored the function and membership of this eccentric group, established in 1914, who challenged received wisdom on homosexuality, obscenity, divorce, abortion and birth control. She notes that members included clergymen,

anthropologists, psychiatrists, progressive educationalists, nudists and the occasional lecher (78). Jennings White attempted to apply a programme of radical sexual reform within the Order, including trial, open and even promiscuous group marriages. While these ideas were warmly received by only a few--and were viewed with utter horror by Christians and Quakers--they expressed his broader hope that the Order would form the basis for a new social utopia.

Theodore Faithfull was another sexologist member of the Order. Formerly a veterinary surgeon, Faithful shifted his sights post-war to psychology and established an independent experimental woodcraft school in Norfolk from 1920. Under his headship, with Revel on his staff, Priory Gate developed innovative and sometimes controversial methods. A hardy, primitive outdoor experience was at the heart of the provision, including, in addition to camping, naked exercise, extensive hikes and the hand-making of many items by the children, such as their own clothes. Some aspects of the curriculum were highly controversial in their own time, including the use of children as naked models in school drawing classes; indeed, some remain outside current orthodoxy. Faithfull penned a series of radical psychological publications in the interwar years including *Bisexuality: An Essay on Extraversion and Introversion*. Here bisexuality was understood as the psychological coexistence of essentialist masculine and feminine characteristics within all persons rather than sexual attraction to men and women. In this and his other works, Faithfull detailed his woodcraft experiments and argued that gender mixing and outdoor living in the Order positioned child members as the bisexual “vanguard”.

Faithfull encouraged nudity as a means of fostering pride in the body and satisfying natural curiosity. Nudity for sunbathing and swimming was part of the simplification of life and the harmony with nature that underpinned woodcraft philosophies, but in the hands of members with interests in Freudian psychology, it also prevented repressive tendencies in

children, which were believed to lead to morbid desires, blocked energy and arrested development. Revel argued that these issues could also be avoided by adult nudity; she stated, “it should be possible to all who are not suffering from repressions to bathe in water or take sun baths together naked without experiencing any emotion, pleasant or unpleasant, due to nakedness” (*Cheiron's Cave* 74). Revel argued for frank sex education in her books, *Cheiron's Cave: The School of the Future* (1928) and *Tented Schools: Camping as a Technique of Education* (1934). She argued, “The whole subject needs to be treated naturally and in the daylight. The parents should be able to speak plainly. If they show they have not recovered from the prudery in which most of the present adult generation was reared, the child will inevitably copy their attitude” (*Cheiron's Cave* 132).

Like Baden-Powell, Revel had outspoken views on children's masturbation. Historian Sam Pryke has characterised the discussion of masturbation as “something of an obsession” (17) in early Scouts; advice given on the subject was strident and regular. Founding publications claimed that the practice would lead to lunacy. Although this approach was moderated by the 1920s, masturbation was still considered to be a problem to be solved. Revel, as a woodcrafter, took a more liberal perspective, noting the damage done in claiming the practice to be a sin, but she still sought to eliminate the habit. She argued that it resulted from fundamental unhappiness and that the root of the dissatisfaction--of which masturbation was merely the symptom--should be pursued.

The subject was dealt with comprehensively in 1930, when the Order undertook a study of their experiential philosophy of “learning by doing” on the education of children, producing an internal report examining how the principle could be applied to practical and moral contexts, from the experience of travel to the condition of poverty. Among the experiential areas discussed was that of sex. The report offered a plain-spoken assessment of the child's interest in sex at various developmental stages, and argued for the normalisation

of masturbation. It stated, “after puberty masturbation may be described as a dirty and babyish habit”, nonetheless, it is “practised by many who cannot be classed as abnormal in any way either physically or mentally.” The report also included a draft Order policy to promote “greater freedom in sexual behaviour”, with the declaration that “Sex is the greatest expression of our unity with one another and with all life, and it cannot be neglected with impunity” (Order of Woodcraft Chivalry). Proposals were floated for companionate marriage, cheap and easy divorce, the eradication of stigma around illegitimacy, widespread information about contraception, and the “advocacy of nakedness as far as appropriate and practical”. With the exception of the last point, rooted in its own time and place, each recommendation sounds eminently sensible around ninety years later. Such advanced thinking, however, was quickly moderated by other editorial hands. A second version reinserted monogamous marriage, and suggested that contraception should be avoided until after the birth of preferably two children, due to the unhappiness and sterility that would surely result. The final word was that “Low-grade sex morality is anti-social and wholly inconsistent with the Order’s ideal of Chivalry” (Order of Woodcraft Chivalry).

Within the Order, then, a range of experimental sexual propositions were mooted. Some were outlandish and remain unconventional today, yet many sound reasonable to the twenty-first century liberal ear. Even within the experimental and temporary worlds constructed in 1920s camps, however, concerns over reputation and respectability challenged the application of new ideas. When Revel married fellow Order member Norman Glaister, another radical psychiatrist and sexologist, in a “troth-plighting” ritual, for example, they wrote their own mystic vows and wore rustic homemade tunics and flowers in their hair. They even cut their wedding cake with a woodcraft axe. These were symbolic gestures of resistance, however, as the Order had collectively agreed that the marriage must be legally consecrated before the ceremony could take place. Order camps offered a place where

challenging new ideas about sex and relationships could be entertained, but these were contained within the limits of convention whenever the play turned serious or threatened to leave the boundaries of the site.

The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift

Among the Order's early advisors was John Hargrave, a precocious young Scout leader, author and illustrator of popular books and articles on woodcraft technique. Hargrave, also of Quaker descent, had joined the Boy Scouts shortly after its inception as a teenager and had risen to Staff Artist by 1914. In 1916, after two years' service as a stretcher-bearer, Hargrave was appointed Commissioner for Woodcraft and Camping. His war experiences, however, ruptured his faith in the movement and he used his senior position to corral support for a splinter section who valued the backwoodsmanship and ceremony of Scouting but deplored its militarism. By 1919, with the publication of his anti-establishment tract, *The Great War brings it Home*, Hargrave's oppositional position was sealed, and he was ultimately expelled. As had surely been his plan, he took many disaffected Scout supporters with him. In 1920 he created the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift.

Hargrave's new organisation--whose name is an archaic English colloquialism meaning "proof of strength" and had nothing to do with the white supremacist group with which it unfortunately shares its initials--proposed a programme that went far beyond Scouts' improving leisure (Pollen). Kinsfolk--as members were known--committed themselves to world peace, world government and the reorganisation of industry, education and the economy. Hargrave was a highly charismatic figure with an immense capacity for self-promotion. As well as being a talented writer and artist, his employment in advertising gave him extensive knowledge of propaganda and persuasion. Through these skills he was able to attract the endorsement of high-profile thinkers, including sexologist Ellis, biologists Julian Huxley and J. Arthur Thompson and novelist H. G. Wells. Each was concerned with the need

for physical, social, and cultural renaissance post-war. As such, Kibbo Kift's political reconstruction, combined with all-ages activities in camping, hiking and handicraft, presented an endeavour worthy of support.

A core Kibbo Kift ambition was the development of physical, mental, and spiritual health; that commitment was underpinned by faith in eugenic improvement. Members were expected to better themselves through exercise and hardihood, and make informed decisions about pairing up. The organisation was open to men and women--indeed, this coeducational aspect was one of the principle points of attraction for its substantial suffragette membership--and the establishing of Kibbo Kift marriages and families was encouraged. The children of the organisation, it was expected, would carry Kin philosophies forward and ultimately lead a new Kibbo Kift world. As part of their drive to reform all aspects of life, books by sexologists, including Edward Carpenter, featured on recommended reading lists.

Kibbo Kift's combination of the forward--and backwards--looking is a key characteristic, and one which can be seen in all aspects of the group's style and ethos. Primitivist outdoor practices stood side-by-side along with cutting-edge ideas about birth-control and technology. Camping developed valuable survival skills that would be needed after the expected collapse of civilisation; more fundamentally, it tapped into something essential and authentic. As Hargrave put it, "In camp all affectations, fads, and civilised veneers drop away and reveal us exactly as we are" (*Confession* 91). He continued, "It is a necessary break-away, a ritualistic exodus, from Metropolitan standards of civilisation, from pavements, sky-signs, shops, noise, glitter, smoke. It is a vital urge" (93).

Despite camp offering a radical crucible for social transformation, some aspects of the existing order penetrated Kibbo Kift practices. One of these was Kibbo Kift's organisational method. Despite its original appeal to socialists, Hargrave had a powerful personal need to remain the unchallenged head of his organisation and he justified his dictatorial position

through recourse to emergent political ideas about the ineffectiveness of democracy.

Similarly, despite the commitment of the organisation to tear down “taboos” and to be at the forefront of coeducation, Kibbo Kift was strongly conventional on matters of gender and sexuality. It had a membership equally split in numbers between women and men, yet few women held positions of authority. Unlike the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, who explicitly described themselves as feminist, Hargrave saw the women’s movement as a failure, arguing that the shift in sex roles “leads to an intermediate position which tends more and more to make both sexes atonic and devitalised, to their everlasting misery.” In contradistinction, noting that “this sometimes astonishes,” he asserted, “The main directive force of The Kindred is in the hands of the males” (*Confession* 85).

One area in which Kinsfolk aimed to cut a swathe through “taboos” was in sex education. Hargrave’s pre-Kibbo Kift publications took a Scout-like tone on matters of “continence” (masturbation). He believed that boys raised on “open-air woodcraft methods” (*Great War* 323) would not be overwhelmed by sexual desire in adolescence. Woodcrafters’ experience of nakedness in camp, their proximity to reproduction and fertilisation in nature, and their understanding of “totems and taboos” learnt through primitivist play were expected to stand them in good stead. Hargrave felt “instincts” had become confused as a result of urban sophistication and he urged a return to more “natural”, “primitive” approaches to love than simpering and giggling courtship on “motor-buses and tube stations” (*Great War* 323). Despite his calls to transform sexual relationships, Hargrave also proclaimed, “The Kindred is strongly hetero-sexual and dislikes any blurring of the edges of the male and female qualities. It has no place whatsoever for the masculine type of woman or the effeminate type of man” (*Confession* 84).

Other Kibbo Kift members also had frank opinions on matters of sex. Arthur B. Allen, the leader of the Kibbo Kift teachers’ group, trialled a Kin policy for “sex-instruction” in

classrooms. He described, “No Kin Teacher will stand up in front of a class with ‘And now children, I am going to tell you where you come from when you are born.’” He argued, “To do so is to put the Kindred on a level with all the other woollies who succeed in making the child conscious of his own penis and then leave him in a worse mess than before.” Instead, Allen proposed that “honesty towards the child is the Kin policy. When a child asks, ‘Where do kittens come from?’, tell him.” (173). Allen noted two dangerous forces in contemporary society. One was the “sex hysteria” of Mrs. Grundy (a figurative term connoting an upholder of prudish convention), and the other was “sex-rot” (including voyeurism in racy theatre shows, male same-sex relations, rape in marriage, and paedophilia). Kinsfolk needed to battle both. As a reward for speaking so frankly about sex, he warned, “We shall be attacked, sullied, libelled, dishonoured. We shall be accused of immorality, of free love, of license. Our camps will be called brothels and our women whores.” He continued, “But we know that it is not so. Our conduct will have to be our weapon and it must never falter. No shadow of a shadow must fall across the path of a single Kinsman, no moral aberration must be permitted in any one of our lives” (176).

While official documentation regularly celebrated Kin marriages and the birth of Kin children, other kinds of relationships were inevitable. In one notable case, a young Kinsman, Angus McBean, a shop assistant and an aspiring theatre designer and photographer, tested the limits of Kin morality. McBean would become one of the most celebrated photographers of the British stage in the mid-twentieth century, a lover of many men on London’s queer scene—including Quentin Crisp—and would be imprisoned with hard labour for same-sex relationships in pre-liberation times. His first homosexual experience, however, was in Kibbo Kift, with an older and more sexually-experienced man who moved in similar naturist, social reform and mystic circles. Roland Berrill and McBean—who was, at the time, in an unconsummated heterosexual marriage—understandably conducted their relationship out of

view, given the condemnations of homosexuality in official Kin discourse. Later in life McBean noted that when he revealed his orientation to Hargrave, the leader “didn’t seem at all surprised” (Woodhouse 52). Indeed, McBean’s experimental approach to sexual identity and queer desire is writ large in his photographs, where he styled images of Kinsmen in theatrical costumes cut away to reveal exposed buttocks, in ritualistic naked poses on sacred sites, and in meditation on the chalk phallus of the Cerne Abbas giant. In his own Kibbo Kift appearances, he experimented with the minimum of clothing, flamboyant dress, and full make-up.

Kibbo Kift inhabited a curious position in relation to convention. On the one hand it was radical in its philosophy and appearance. Its aesthetic style drew on the artistic avant-garde, and Hargrave and his followers saw themselves as “intellectual barbarians” opposed to the “mass-mind”. Yet they mostly stood apart, in income, education and connections, from cultural elites and could be scornful of “overcivilised”, “refined” and Bohemian people. As such, members’ moral and political compasses were not always easy to predict. The organisation attracted suffragettes but had aspects that were anti-feminist; it challenged taboos about sex education while reinforcing popular myths about sexual behaviour; it planned to revolutionise all aspects of political and cultural structures while maintaining conservative personal relationships.

Woodcraft Folk

Kibbo Kift began as a socialist alternative to Scouts yet, as it developed, some policies and practices changed fundamentally. In the mid-1920s, new economic theories of wealth distribution were added to the group’s aims. These ideas of Social Credit came to dominate Hargrave’s interests, and by the early 1930s he turned his back on woodcraft. Kibbo Kift was transformed into a new organisation marked by political street marching and paramilitary stylings. The majority of members, originally enthused by the outdoor aspects,

left. The split resembled an earlier rupture that also halved Kin membership. A 1924 schism had divided those who endorsed Hargrave as their unchallenged leader, and those who wished to camp and campaign democratically. The crisis resulted in a motion of no confidence in Hargrave, and the socialists who led the charge walked out.

Within a year, two defectors founded their own group, Woodcraft Folk. Borrowing many aspects from Kibbo Kift--including camp ceremonial practices--the Folk also added a stronger left-wing political direction. Leslie Paul, a young writer and the organisation's first leader, developed most of the Folk's early philosophy, including the education of working class children the application of socialist principles to outdoor living. Camping in the Folk offered an opportunity to try out a socialist world in microcosm. *The Course of Instruction*, designed to inform leaders of Folk methods, stated: "Camping does not need justification. We do not need to enter into a profound analysis of the 'why' of camping. We camp because we like it. But camping in a woodcraft fashion is more than a pastime, it is an art and an educational adventure" (2). As such, its function was said to provide healthy outdoor opportunities for young and old to experience self-reliance and communal responsibility.

In 1934, the Folk declared, "Modern civilisation stands condemned for its ugliness, falsehood, greed, dirt, disease, disorganisation, poverty, war. Surely a new way of life can be found?" Training for this "New World Order" was to occur through "example, practice and research" into earth kinship, world unity, and "knowledge of self and sex" (2). Sex was mentioned to show the radical and progressive-minded nature of the organisation; it was also an acknowledgement that children in the Folk would be unlikely to receive such information elsewhere. As outlined in *The Course of Instruction*, most child members came from working class homes and "will have not even an elementary understanding of life". On sex, "the child's knowledge will be chiefly smatterings of gossip, invariably distorted" (2).

The Folk were well aware that their core principle of coeducation was seen as scandalous. As such, they argued, “Neither licence nor taboo must spoil this comradeship. [...] We have had to fight hard to secure this new relation between the sexes and we must be self-disciplined enough to safeguard it” (3). Unlike Kibbo Kift, the relation between the sexes was intended to be equal. As *The Course* put it, “We wish to see a frank and free comradeship springing naturally and unforced from our delight in each other and our common way of life” (2). Such frankness also applied to the instruction given to children about sex; the Folk’s aim was “to avoid giving children a crippling sense of guilt over the habit, to avoid completely veiled warnings about purity, and to give advice only when asked for it” (*Training of Pioneers*, 23). Folk leaders were pointed towards *Experiments in Sex Education*, a 1935 book produced by the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals, an organisation that united social reformers and woodcrafters in its espousal of sexual freedom and socialism.

By and large, sexual relationships were less of a preoccupation in the Folk than they were in other woodcraft organisations, and they became even less of a priority after the Second World War. This was in part due to Paul’s departure as leader and a drive by his successors to cast off aspects--from fanciful costume to archaic language--that had brought accusations of cultishness. Successive improvements in British education also meant less pressure to fill gaps in an inadequate curriculum. Instead the Folk maintained their core specialism: an education based on peace, democracy and internationalism, with the emphasis on creating cooperative and socially-engaged citizens. New campaigns were added as they arose in left-wing British politics. These included, from the 1980s onwards, an expanding interest in tackling sexism in the wider world as well as in the organisation.

As a part of this broad agenda, the Folk established a working group to examine restrictions to gay rights in the late 1980s at a time when the introduction of the notorious

Clause 28 of the Local Government Act, which prohibited councils from “promoting” homosexuality, was galvanising the gay rights movement in Britain. This group was the subject of controversy among those who might be described as the old guard. The former General Secretary, Henry Fair, who had first joined the Folk in the 1920s, stated in 1988 that he was “appalled” to learn of the Gay and Lesbian Support Group, arguing that if the tabloid press heard of it, “they would have crucified the movement.” Fair warned that it was not an area that the Folk should explore. He clarified, “I’m not saying that there’s not a problem there. But it’s a problem that should be dealt with by an adult organisation [...]. It is not a problem that should be dealt with by an organisation that professes itself to be a children’s organisation” (136).

Shortly after the founding of Gay and Lesbian Support, a women’s group was established to develop anti-sexist educational resources. By the early 1990s a further group, styled Men for Change, argued that men could and should play a role in recognising and challenging non-sexist behaviour as individuals and within organisations. Despite the group coinciding with the emerging men’s movement of the period, inspired by publications such as Robert Bly’s influential *Iron John*, the desire was not to establish a separatist space in the Folk to explore essentialist ideas about masculinity but to acknowledge that changes in attitude could only come if men and women worked together.

The probing self-scrutiny of these documents shows that members’ recognition that the Folk, for all of its longstanding attempts to create an egalitarian space, might be reproducing the gendered asymmetries of the wider world. These included the historic woodcraft tendency of girls to select for themselves symbolic names of flowers, while boys chose beasts. Female and male domestic and public roles tended to be replicated in camp duties. Men for Change noted, regretfully, “the Folk is no different to the Labour Party and the Trade Union movement. Gender issues have come onto our agendas relatively recently

and still contain potential for conflict, unease and confrontation. Yet simply passing anti-sexist policies is not enough--policies need to be followed by positive actions". To this end, they drew up a manifesto, organised meetings and circulated reading lists that included resources developed by other youth organisations alongside Marxist-Feminist studies of gender and sexuality. Their efforts show that the Folk was determined to include radical approaches to sex and gender within its remit of "education for social change".

The need for the Folk to examine its own behaviour is reflected in attitudes of members to gender equality. In her short commissioned history, Mary Davis suggested that it was not just older members who tended to object to efforts to eradicate sexism in the Folk from the 1980s; there were some who saw such concerns as merely "middle-class fads". This she reflected on with some surprise, as unlike the labour movement more broadly, the Folk had always had women leaders (114). Davis happily noted the Folk's full support for tackling racism, sexism and homophobia by the date of the millennium, but she also noted that it was a late starter; some more traditionally cautious organisations had already led the advance.

These discussions show how issues were raised, debated and made material as the organisation matured. In the twenty-first century, the Folk has forged forward with campaigning on sexuality and gender and once again holds a pioneering position. As part of its longstanding membership of International Falcon Movement--Socialist Education International (IFM-SEI), a European alliance of left-wing youth organisations, they have developed an important collection of educational materials called *Rainbow Resources*. Produced in 2011 and now in its second edition, these build on what IFM-SEI describe as "over forty years" of working with young people on issues of gender and sexuality. More specifically, the material developed out of the regular IFM-SEI initiative, Queer Easter, instituted in 2001, which brings together young people from across Europe to discuss sexual identity, heteronormativity, and homophobia. The work undertaken in these projects aims "to

curb heteronormative and cisnormative attitudes before they have a chance to be fully developed” (4). In particular the guide was produced in response to a paucity of such material for under twelves. In the context of the wider aspirations of international socialist education, the emphasis remains on understanding gender and sexuality as “part of our struggle against all forms of exclusion and discrimination” (4).

Conclusion

Woodcraft organisations in Britain emerged as part of a network of social reform practices, linked by pacifism and socialism, as reactions to the Great War. As such, their interests overlapped with oppositional political and intellectual ideas more broadly, including feminism and sexology. While each of the three woodcraft organisations had differing emphases, and each approached sexuality, gender roles, and sex education in different ways, all were agreed that mainstream solutions to social problems needed radical revision. Woodcraft camps offered temporary spaces away from the city; they were organised not only against the so-called civilised world but also against the dominant Boy Scout mould. Women and girls were included to disrupt male domination; models drawn from popular ideas about Native American methods of organisation were internationalist and anti-imperialist in aim. Each had differing philosophies of camping but its centrality to all woodcraft organisations was a rejection of urban sophistication, comfort and decadence. Instead, woodcraft espoused collective living, physical hardihood and natural health; all were territories informed by leftist lifestyles.

Woodcraft organisations were highly unorthodox in their own time. In a newspaper article entitled “Queer Societies” from 1925, Kibbo Kift achieved the dubious honour of the uppermost position among “three thousand” niche societies operating in London. Described as “the most curious”, Kin practices were described as “weird rites” and were thoroughly ridiculed (7). In the 1950s, William Eager, a historian of boys’ clubs, also used the term queer

to describe woodcraft organisations, dismissing them as “long-haired enthusiasms labelled with high-fallutin’ names, of which the friendly, sporting, sensible and humorous working-boy would fight shy.” For Eager, woodcraft aims were merely “Fads, fancies and fanaticisms”, nothing less than a form of “queer feminism which would affiliate Boys’ Clubs to Girls’ Club Federations”.

While queerness in these instances was used to designate strangeness, queerness in woodcraft organisations can also be understood another way. In Houlbrook’s use of the term, to queer is to challenge the prevailing social order and to embrace the disruptive. What made these organisations strange was, in many cases, their experimentation with appearances, ideas and practices that were outside of their time and place. In this, they were self-consciously rebels and agitators. They operated within but largely against interwar moral expectations of sex, gender, and beyond; they queered dominant thinking and they aspired to be a thorn in the side of dominant youth organisations. Devoted to the training of children, their sexual politics mounted a standing challenge to respectability in their foundational years, yet many of the ideas pioneered as radical interventions--not least coeducational camping--have now become mainstream practice. In some outdoor youth education programmes in the twenty-first century, gender and sex roles remain contested territories. Gay youth, for example, have only been accepted into Boy Scouts as recently as 2013; gay adults were only permitted to lead--and even then with some provisos--in 2015. Woodcraft organisations were founded in explicit contradistinction to Scouts one hundred years ago. In the radical queer resources assembled by Woodcraft Folk in the present day, this opposition shows itself to be still alive and well.