

Sex and the Boarding Culture

Nick Duffell's address to the 2009 Boarding Concern Conference

The personal is political

Several events inspired me to this talk, most brought to my attention by my colleagues in Boarding Concern.

First, Thurstine Basset gave me a copy of the remarkable and blood-curdling *Empire and Sexuality* by Cambridge professor Ronald Hyam, with whom I struck up a very English dialogue by post, and who later turned out to be the tutor of the husband of our invited speaker, Vyvyen Brendan, my second inspiration. Vyvyen's magnificent first book, *Children of the Raj*, had reminded me of my time in India where as a young man I taught in a boarding school, but also of my first aborted career as an academic orientalist.

Thirdly, I have to admit, is having sex on my brain all my life, and struggling, as I have from an early age, imagining this to be a personal fault - that I was the only one who was so obsessed and therefore doubtless terribly bad. Yet as Joy Schaverien and I recalled over supper the night before the conference, true to form as children of the sixties, in this whole area of boarding and being an ex-boarder, "the personal" clearly "is political!" And, I would add, the political is emotional, and sexual!

My final inspiration was James Foucar who pointed me towards the horrifying new on-line TV station of the BSA - the Boarding Schools Association. Do check out their site, but make sure you haven't just eaten. Here we are treated to a gamut of well known TV news anchors, whom we

recognise from our national channels, presenting various aspects of 'boarding today', featuring delightful children and caring staff, and even an apparent round-table discussion on the merits of boarding. The impression is one of a totally objective survey of the integrity of British life. But it made me feel sick and depressed to think that this amount of money, power, and influence is what we are pitching ourselves against. The more you see this, the more disgusting it becomes. This is not a 'level playing field', as these people like to say, it is a 'robust' manipulation of lies ... (and here I go again, I am afraid, being led astray by my feelings once more.....) ... it is the crusader spirit, the 'white man' at his worst. I am ashamed of them.

Why is he waffling about the crusades, when we are supposed to be talking about sex, you ask? Hang on, if you can, I'll try to take you there.

You see I recently learned that people in the Middle East consider our current military operations there to be nothing less than a new Crusade. Fascinated by this, I've been reading summaries of contemporary Arab accounts of the invasions that went on for hundreds of years from the end of the eleventh century. From this perspective, the Crusades reveal themselves as a most shameful piece of European history - one which could have been designed in some woman-free, oak-panelled, WMD obsessed senior common room.

The War on the Indigenous

It seems that the phenomenal initial success of the cross-bearers was largely due to the fact that they locals could not fathom them. Their motives seemed unclear: what were they doing in a place where Muslims, Jews and at least four varieties of Christian had lived peacefully side by side for years? And how could you deal with an enemy who's barbarity and repeated breaches of promises went against all the codes of warriorship, and who lacked both institutions of justice and any notion of the arts of healing?

It was the same story again with the Red Indians, the aborigines, the British Raj, and one that now - I believe - reasserts itself in the infamous 'War on Terror'. What I see is that there's a war of occidental, 'civilized', rational man against tribal, pre-enlightenment, instinctual indigenous man. I call it the 'War on the Indigenous'.

In 1996, when we were planning our first Boarding School Survivors residential follow-up event, I asked the author of the marvellous *Of Water and the Spirit*, indigenous ritual expert from Burkino Faso, Malidoma Patrice Soma, to join us. As a child, Malidoma was forcibly removed from his tribe and dumped in a residential seminary for more than a decade. He laughed loudly at the notion of 'Boarding School Survivors' but agreed to come and work with us, reckoning we were all suffering from a sense of 'exile' - obviously from family life, but also from something essential within us.

I now understand more clearly what he meant. The *indigenous* in us consists of our *interior innocence*. This is our original nature, which we experience and express primarily through our emotions and our sexuality.

Civilization, as Freud first showed us, causes these to be repressed. But the need to employ stronger defences than repression sends them into exile, as it were. And exile, as our public-school education in Greek myth and Shakespeare taught us, was the strongest punishment of the ancient world. So when we exile a part of ourselves we do something dire to our own humanity. We then need someone else to carry this despised and disowned part for us. Perhaps the Crusaders were the first to discover what a scam it was to exile and project out those missing qualities onto others, and then hate them, and then feel really good about it, because God sanctioned it.

Once we have exiled the indigenous in us, in their stead arise the twin mental properties of shame and secrecy, whose psychological mechanism is dissociation or splitting. And this is a very effective defence, for once learned, splitting is very hard to unlearn. It becomes an ingrained habit specifically because it has been developed under duress as a defense not only against the world but also against the self. Under these conditions, the right hand knows not what the left hand does.

A Perfect Project

What has this all to do, I hear you rightly complain, with boarding culture and sex?

Well, I have suggested before that the boarding school project was to raise sons for the Empire, and the Empire's job was to rule over and exploit the indigenous world. Internally, the indigenous is joined as an enemy by all the other qualities considered dangerous to the project: the feminine,

the voluptuous, the domestic, the childish, the emotional, etc. These then have to be disowned, exiled and projected out far away. All you need is a few savages, women and children and - hey presto!

However, disowned items tend to bounce back, and what has had to be left behind tends to be unconsciously yearned for. The sons of Empire had a problem with sex. We now know, that in the absence of having made good attachments, males easily over-compensate through sex: males readily use sex for bonding and gratification rather than as intimate exchange. In my own life, I recognize my "sex on the brain" has to do with this, and that my relationships with females were always primarily sexualized. For the Empire and the boarding project has a serious problem with females. In 1999 I wrote:

"How readily might we make women, who were already becoming unfamiliar, into fantasy figures, whether goddesses or servants. Their absence was the greatest possible stimulus for fantasising, behind which there could be a vague fear that women might always let us down. Here is John Le Carré, in *A Perfect Spy*, telling us how Magnus Pym dealt with the loss of both his mother and her successor, while he was at prep school:

Her demise entrenched him as a self-reliant person, confirming in him his knowledge that women were fickle and liable to sudden disappearances.

Such unrealistic ideas of women were to be expected, given their scarcity and the enforced Spartan manliness of the schools. Our longings for rescue and comfort were mixed with those unaccountable stirrings in our loins. The official line which made sex dirty and to be feared was mixed with the peer group attitude that it was a passport to heaven. This concoction had the combined effect of ensuring that we would emerge without the slightest realistic idea of what a woman might be.

As mother goddesses they would inevitably disappoint, for marriage and relationship actually means that you have to learn to get on with a real person, a real live woman, with her own feelings, wishes, moods and limitations, who may not be entirely focused on serving you. As erotic tramps, or eternally ready sex-objects, the other favourite male fantasy, women would also disappoint, for exactly the same reason."

The result is full-blown but unconscious misogyny, which leads to countless un-nameable horrors in relationships. And worse, disastrously, it is not just a male problem, for it also lives *inside* the women. This means that you have generations of women growing up not rooted in a positive femininity. As mothers, they raise girls who do not have good femininity mirrored back to them and boys who look down on women. The boys learn to respect only the opinions of other men, but are dependent women for sex, and therefore secretly hate them for this dependence. Some resolve this problem by bypassing women for sex altogether - very common in the heyday of the British Empire, when the white women were miles away, as Ronald Hyam graphically informs us in *Empire and Sexuality*.

British middleclass women, I suggest, were therefore forced to grow up and identify with a femininity whose true nature is despised and disowned. This is an incalculable problem for a society, and one which would horrify the indigenous world. No wonder the women ex-boarders suffer so much - sometimes I think more than the men - since they have been forced through a mould designed on extreme male lines. And perhaps no wonder so many women were complicit in giving up their children to the fashion and demands of their epoch. The de-

feminization of women is rather unique in Britain and produces the kind of families where natural instincts are gone against, and readily supports the banishing of children, femininity, the indigenous.

In this way the project achieves a kind of smug perfection in its ability to complete itself. This still operates today, I think, and I spot it on BSA TV, which is why it gets my hackles up. In such a society, apart from sport, the body itself becomes but a vehicle the rational brain, and the latter is supposed to only really belong grown-up men of the correct caste.

But hang on a minute: there is a fault in this logic, as seamlessly propagated as it is by BSA TV, the modern standard bearer of the project. It is, as we at the conference know to our cost, that the ex-boarder man may not be grown up at all. On close examination he is frequently revealed as a little boy masquerading as grown-up, living in terror of being found out ever since his first day at boarding school.

She Who Must Be Obeyed

How do these complex attitudes to sexuality and femininity drive the British? In his extraordinary book, Hyam wonders whether the original energy for creating and administering empire came out of the desire for a free sexuality, given that it was so repressed at home and initially so generously offered by indigenous peoples. The most notably free in this department seem to be famously the South Pacific islanders (Cook had a hard time getting any of his men back to ship!) as well as the First Nation Americans. The latter were of particular interest to me, since it was their traditions Helena and I studied

in order to understand what a pre-Christian attitude to sexuality might look like.

But what you actually get from Hyam's book, based on a study of countless contemporary documents, is an orgy of shame and scandal where the white administrator or settler indulged himself at the expense of cultures that had not linked shame, secrecy and internal conflicts to sexuality in the same way. Unlike the Portuguese, Spanish or French colonists, the British tended to restrict themselves to temporary sexual relations with subjects in an unequal position, taking mistresses, courtesans and servant boys, rather than perusing long-term relationships. In fact they seemed to abhor intermarriage, and offspring from such matches, when they did occur, tended not to fare well. I remember from working in India in the early Seventies how the Anglo-Indians (Tommies) seemed to be universally despised, and Vivienne's book confirms this. Hyam's conclusion is that of all the colonial powers the British were the most secretive about their sexuality.

Then he tells a remarkable story. In the 1860s everything begins to change with the opening of the Suez canal, for the world suddenly and dramatically began to shrink. This facilitated the golden moment of the missionary societies, heralded the great age of Victorian expansion, and, incidentally, that of the boarding school. It also meant that British wives could much more easily join their husbands, which had a marked affect on manners and morals in the Empire. There was a huge change after the arrival of Memsahib, she who stops all the fun (to parody Rider Haggard's, *She Who Must Be Obeyed*, published in 1856, about the terrifying and magnetically

beautiful Queen Ayesha) for the men were now under the scrutiny of 'society'. This forced Imperial sexuality into greater and greater secrecy and had the effect of encouraging prostitution rather than inter-racial relations, or even concubinage - an arrangement which had worked pretty well for everyone. Eventually it resulted in unenforceable acts of parliament known as the Purity Laws.

The British now forced their vision of proper sexuality onto the entire Empire, while the world prostitution trade ballooned. Their sanitised secrecy even affected indigenous religions. This explains why modern Hinduism, rooted in the balance of sexual opposites, deified as Shiva-Shakti, became sanitised under the influence of the Raj's Muscular Christianity. It thereby became stripped of its essential transformational power inherent in the interchange between the masculine and feminine, which is retained in other ancient religions, Aboriginal, African, and particularly Tibetan Buddhism, where the deity is always visualised as seated with his feminine consort in the 'woman-on-top' position.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, dare I go a step further than Hyam and say that Britain taught the world how to split, and fired by Muscular Protestantism how to put shame into the psyche? I sometimes think we put shame in so deep that of all colonial powers we had to use the least brutality (although quite enough!) because we managed to get the conquered to hate themselves from the inside. The captured Chief Red Cloud apparently

said: "It is not your guns we fear most."

But what of us, now? We ourselves are products of the loss of the indigenous and the inheritors of shame. Can we overcome our splitting and let our indigenous nature, our emotions and sexuality return to their rightful life-giving place within us?

It is not easy, but just as with taking down the *Strategic Survival Personality*, I believe that there is a solution. It is one which I have been working on throughout my life, both personally and professionally. This solution does not really involve the brain, it involves the body, for what we seek is still in the body, and we can learn how to access it.

A way into this is offered by the following schema. The form comes from the First Nation Americans' standard teaching tool, the Medicine Wheel. Its begins by putting sex in the right place - central to our very nature as we were created through sex. In Malidoma's culture there is not even a word for sex. To use the wheel we are invited to pay attention to the order and the conversation between of various natural intrinsic qualities.

Imagine a wheel rather like a compass, as a tool for ordering the right direction of our sexuality. We start in the south, the place of our feelings, crushed at school but still there. We must relearn trust in them. The natural quality is *Innocence*. We next move north, where the natural quality is *Curiosity*. However, this has been overridden with centuries of shame caused by Christianity, especially the due to muscular version. And yet our culture is still incongruently curious about sex - look what's happening in the web. For suppressed innocence

and shame brings about over-curiosity as well as a surfeit of the next quality: *Excitement*. This resides in the east, and is about our spirit, how bright our flame burns, our natural response to our own sexuality surfacing and potentially engaging with another being.

This engagement will require *Regulation*, which we find in the west. Our sexuality needs to be regulated, not through our beliefs, but in our bodies and the context of how we live. In the beginning, children need to learn this through the available bodies of their parents - hard enough in our culture anyway, but doubly difficult if you were at boarding school. And yet your body is still your teacher: it can teach you, if you are willing to trust it again.

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More information on developing a holistic approach to gender and sexuality is available at www.genderpsychology.com

Finally, in the centre - the hub and heart of the whole wheel - the quality is *Relationship*: the boarding school survivor's bete noir! Sex acts are a part of a relational exchange, in appropriate relationships of equals. Sexual relationships are mediated by the heart, which longs to connect with other hearts and provides a context for all our sexuality. The heart is full of longing and desire and will give us direction. Our heart wants us to be both true to our self and to open to another, to come out of shame and loneliness, to renounce splitting and secrecy, to have remorse for damage done, and to accept love.

In the end, this is the only sustainable way.