

UnDividingLines

There are Queer Things Going On in the Highlands & Islands

Spring and Summer 2020

In Conversation With... **Estelle McNeill**

Fiona Percy Jason Armstrong LGB Transphobia
Men On Film: A Brief History of the Gay Porn Film
Sarah Burton Jane Patten Cathi Rae Sand Owsnett
Roz White: Writing the Trans Experience TIE Campaign
Growing Your Own Genitals: Top & Bottom Surgery Diaries
Kevin Crowe: No Home In This World Orkney Pride *and much much more...*

Introduction

When the call for submissions for UnDividingLines issue 12 went out at the beginning of January little could we have imagined just how different the world in which we live would be by the time the magazine came out less than 3 months later. As the new coronavirus, Covid-19, spreads amongst us and society as we knew it becomes almost unrecognisable it might be easy to think that those we so readily dismissed when they warned that the End of Days was looming might not have been so far from the truth as we had hoped. It's at times like this we need security and community and a sense of belonging more than ever before: when we feel isolated and vulnerable so many of us want to connect and feel less alone. There are many ways we can achieve this, UnDividingLines being just a single example, yet we hope it is one that might remind us all that there are other people around us who are willing to share their attitudes of positivity and normality which are so important when so much of what we see and read might sometimes make it difficult for us to believe these things still exist.

Sharing positivity was just one of the motivations behind asking Estelle McNeill to be the subject of the *In Conversation With...* article in this issue. She has been quietly supportive of UnDividingLines since the early days and this hadn't gone unnoticed. What hadn't been clear was how involved Estelle has previously been in the Highland LGBT+ community, including our very first Pride march years before the large-scale parades we've seen over the last couple of years (though, alas, not this year). Estelle has certainly earned the space to share her personal story and takes her well-deserved place alongside everyone else who has graced the covers of previous issues of the magazine.

This issue, like all those that came before it, is packed so full with such a superb and diverse array of articles from a wide range of contributors, several writing here for the first time, that it would be unfair to single out just a few. Read them all – every single one is worthy of your time and attention – and, as always, the magazine is a credit to everyone's willingness to freely share their stories, interests and opinions.

As many of you will know, this issue of the magazine is to be my last as Editor. Kevin Crowe has been entrusted with taking over from the beginning of April and, although he has already proven himself as an excellent guest editor, issue 13 will be his first in charge of every aspect of the magazine. I'm sure we will all support him in continuing the fine tradition that UnDividingLines has proudly established over the last 6 years. My role in its development has been a privilege from the very outset and it has been humbling how generous everyone has been with their openness, honesty and generosity: thank you doesn't seem adequate but, as anyone who has been directly involved with the magazine will know, it is meant with total and heart-felt sincerity. Thank you.

UnDividingLines 13 will be out on the day the clocks change: October 25th 2020.

In the meantime, enjoy this issue, look after yourselves and each other, and stay safe.



www.undividinglines.wordpress.com





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In Conversation With...

Estelle McNeill



Can you tell us a little about your Highland background and family?

I grew up in Fort William, a small west coast town in the Highlands, with my parents and brother. Both my parents are now retired but Mum, who is from Fort William, was a telephonist and my Dad, originally from Glasgow, was a footballer and joiner by trade. My younger brother runs his own Fort William barber shop, called Neebs Nappers (www.facebook.com/neebsnappers/). My grandmother and Great grandmother were from the Caithness and Thurso areas and I also have relations from and in Hamilton and the Glasgow area. I worked with my parents in their snack van business until I left school and then got a job as a waitress, but I wasn't cut out for that and so opted for learning support auxiliary working in schools until I moved to Inverness in 1996.

What was life like growing up in Fort William?

As a child it was great as you could play outside until the street lights came on with no worries, but being a small town everyone knew everyone which can be a blessing and a curse.



How did your sense of your sexuality evolve and how did the different generations of your family react?

Growing up LGBT in a small town, especially one that was very church orientated, and not knowing anyone else who was LGBT, was quite difficult. Still, I came out to my mum when I was 13. My parents are very unprejudiced so telling my mum felt natural and she explained things really well for me. I also remember having a conversation about it with my gran and she told me to come back and tell her when I was older, which I never did, but she was always accepting of my partners. I was a daddy's girl and put off telling my dad until I was older and had a girlfriend, in my mind I'd built up to telling him but when I eventually did he was so cool about it that it was a bit of an anticlimax.



You decided to move to the other end of the Great Glen, living in Inverness for over 20 years. What prompted you to leave Fort William and what personal changes did it allow you to make?

I was a very shy, self conscious teenager and when I found myself rejected for a job position I'd already been covering I decided it was time for a change and it gave me the courage to spread my wings. I had friends and family in the Inverness area so I moved there in 1996 to study Theatre Arts. It was the best move I could have made as I finally found out who I was and felt more able to be myself there. I developed confidence, met like-minded people and became part of the LGBT community, attending youth groups and organised events. I had various temp jobs until I finished college and eventually settled as a post person where I met lots of great friends and was able to purchase my own home.

While in Inverness you suffered a major health scare. If you're comfortable with doing so, can you tell us what happened and how that impacted your life?

It's a long story but I'll cut it short: scar tissue from an old appendix operation had tangled with my bowel and caused a blockage which in turn turned septic. I had to have emergency laparotomy surgery which meant removal of some bowel and the formation of a temporary stoma. I ended up in intensive care on a ventilator, developed septicaemia and adult respiratory distress syndrome, and my family were told a few times that I wasn't going to make it. It was a close call, and a traumatic time for them, but they were there for me through it all and I've always been a fighter so thankfully I survived. I have been left with some residual health issues that I still deal with every day, including memory loss, but I'm thankful that I'm still here.

You've been involved with the Highland LGBT+ community for many years. How did that come about?

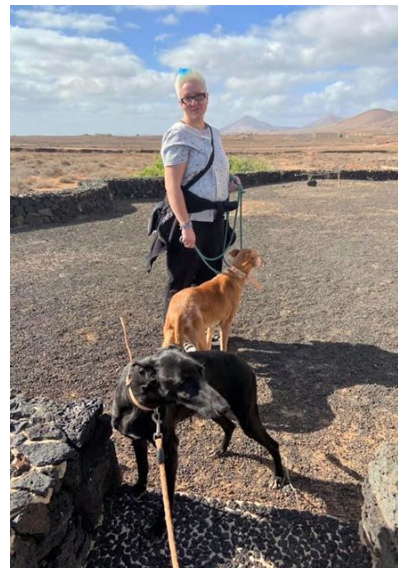
When I moved to Inverness I attended the LGBT youth group where I met many friends, got involved with any LGBT events that took place, attended LGBT ceilidhs, discos and loved hanging out at Reach Out Highland, helping out if I could. I embraced the LGBT life and helped my friend Daniel (Mackenzie-Winters) and everyone else with the 2002 Inverness Pride event.

Staging a Pride event in the Highlands back in 2002 was a brave and bold statement. What sort of energy existed in the local LGBT+ community at that time?

Back then things were a bit more difficult than they are today. Inverness had had gay-friendly clubs and pubs but no reliable 'gay scene' like you get in the bigger cities. I think a lot of people were scared to be out and proud at that time, whereas now I feel more people are accepting. For the organisers of the first ever Highland Pride event back in 2002 it was quite an achievement to have any turnout at all, but it was nothing compared to the 2018 Pride event, which was outstanding, or the 2019 one which I was so disappointed to have missed.

How do you feel about the progress towards recent Pride events in Inverness and Stornoway?

I felt so overwhelmed and emotional, and I know I'm not the only one, with the turnout that the organisers got at the 2018 Inverness Pride event and even more so at the 2019 event. It's outstanding to see such a response, especially in the Highlands and Islands, and makes me incredibly proud of the area. There's even talk of a Pride event in Fort William, which would be amazing. I know there are those who feel we shouldn't need Pride events but we do: until we have equality in every aspect we have to use them to stand together as a community.



Do you think the sudden surge in LGBT+ events are sustainable longterm, and how do you see the community developing in the future?

I would love to think so. Things have come on in such leaps and bounds since I was young and things, especially in Scotland, seem to be improving dramatically for the LGBT+ community. I would still love to see more LGBT+ events and groups, with a good turnout to each activity, and more inclusivity and safety in every aspect of daily life. The LGBT+ community deserves the same normality as everyone else.

Is there any sense of an LGBT+ community in Fort William?

I know of LGBT+ individuals in Fort William and the Lochaber area but I don't think so, not in the community sense, or if there is I've not heard about it but would love to! I can't speak for anyone else but I would quite like to connect with others in the local area. I've thought about starting up a group or meet-up but over the last year I just haven't had the time to be able to commit to anything of the sort. Maybe it'll happen this year.

After a relationship ended in 2018 you moved back to Fort William. How did it feel moving back?

I had actually never seen myself ever moving back. I enjoyed going back for visits, my business and holidays, but hadn't thought about living in Fort William again. I only meant for it to be a stop gap, a breathing space while I saw where my life was going. However, Fort William has changed a lot since I was young and I'm really enjoying the change of pace and quieter, outdoor life. It's a strange feeling, in some ways it feels like I'd never left.

You now have a new girlfriend. How did you meet?

My mum invited me along to an African drumming group that she had been attending. It was a great group and, as it turns out, I love djembe drumming! I met her the first night I was there and we started spending time together, dog walking, swimming, coffee dates, and the rest is history.

You currently run a holiday letting business, but you also produce and sell various craft and jewellery items. What do you make and where do you get your inspiration?

I actually started Estelle Star Jewellery (www.facebook.com/estellestarjewellery/) before McNeill Holiday Lets (www.facebook.com/McNeillHolidayLets). Since my health scare in 2003 I'd been unable to work as I suffer from Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (M.E.) and various other residual health issues, so have to be able to rest whenever I need to. I have always been crafty and had lots of craft equipment just sitting in my house so decided to make use of it and started making things to keep my hands and mind busy. I had friends who had Facebook businesses so decided to give that a go, and that's how I started. The first item I made was a hair fascinator which became the inspirational picture for my logo. I make costume jewellery, although would love to do a silversmithing course, and I've made brooches, badges, cushions – you name it and I'll try making it. I've since moved on to attending Craft Fayres and have a few items for sale in JJ's Café in Fort William (<https://jjs-cafefortwilliam.business.site>).

Can you tell us a little about your own sense of spirituality and your world view?

Ever since I was young I've had an interest in the supernatural, the weird and unusual. I'm a firm believer that all life is sacred but have never thought of myself as spiritual, more of an eclectic: I like to find the magic in nature and the best in everything. I was brought up in the church community but in my late teens decided on a different path: I felt drawn away from religion towards the alternative side, to nature and the 'do what you will but harm none' morality.

You often sport bright and bold hair colours and your use of colour in your craftwork is quite vibrant too. What draws you to such strong visual statements?

I like to think my personality is quite colourful and I love to express my individuality. I wear a lot of black so my hair and craft work are my way of also expressing my more colourful side.

You come across as passionate about Podencos and animal welfare in general.

I've always loved animals and especially dogs. I was heartbroken when I lost my rescue collie a few years ago, at nearly 17: he was my best friend and got me through some really tough times. I'd never heard of Podencos until I met my girlfriend who had fostered a few for a Scottish dog charity, Podencos In Need Scotland (PINS, <https://pinspodencos.weebly.com> and www.facebook.com/podencosinneedscotland/). Since then she's adopted 3 and they are the most wonderful loving dogs. Podencos are a Spanish sighthound hunting dog who are considered throwaway animals once the hunting season is over so are treated very badly. I detest cruelty to animals. I was delighted to be able to volunteer dogwalk at SARA rescue centre on a recent trip to Lanzarote (<http://saraprotectora.org/eng/> and www.facebook.com/saraprotectora/) where there are hundreds of various dogs and cats waiting to be rehomed. They mostly rely on volunteers to walk the dogs as they are only a small team but do the best they can with what they have. I admit there were tears on the first day of returning the dogs as I wanted to take them all home.

You radiate a sense of positivity. Where did this originate and how do you sustain this outlook on life?

I honestly don't know where my positivity comes from, it's just always been there, though admittedly not always in the foreground. I'm pretty sure it's from my parents. I always remember, when I was young and going through sickness or bad times, my dad telling me it'll be okay, you're a McNeill, and that's always stuck with me. Yes, I've had some bad, tough times and I do suffer from mental health issues, so know that life isn't always easy, but things always get better so you just have to ride the waves and wait for the storm to pass: tomorrow is another day.

Looking towards the future, what are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

I have simple wants, and really I would just like to be as happy and healthy as I can be. However, I would like my holiday let business to be successful, I do want to learn to drive, and I look forward to making more memories with my girlfriend, my friends and family and the dogs. And seeing as I only recently got a passport I'm looking forward to exploring further afield too.





Getting Off

The Unlikely Chronicles of a Solosexual on PrEP

Jason Armstrong

It's hard to write about Jason Armstrong's latest book *Getting Off* without also including significant mention of his first one, *Solosexual*. In many ways this new book feels very much like a companion piece to the first, and I did find myself wondering how much sense it would make if read out of context with its predecessor. So it's worth starting this review by referencing some of the context within which *Getting Off* sits.

Solosexual was a groundbreaking piece of insider writing about a particular genre of male (though not exclusively gay) sexual expression focused around masturbation.

'Bators', as the members of this tribe describe themselves, don't view masturbation as simply 'scratching an itch'. Instead, they tend to develop a deep connection with their sexual self through the time they spend with their own body (rather than with a partner).

Even though their focus is very much solo, part of what characterises them is a strong sense of (mostly online) community the like of which – as Armstrong discovers in *Getting Off* – feels markedly lacking from a lot of physical gay sex spaces.

The Importance of Masturbation

Masturbation has a long history of being demonised as second best – a poor substitute for the coupling we should all, supposedly, be aiming for.

For many people who've learned, culturally, to view masturbation as a functional means-to-an-end the idea that anyone could spend many, many hours – sometimes even days – masturbating may seem at best far-fetched, at worst unhealthy.

And yet there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions of us, all over the world, who do this regularly.

I use the word 'us', because my own journey to full sexual self-expression has included a lot of in-depth masturbation similar to the kind that Armstrong describes. Reading these books was a curious experience for me – the details on the page are another man's story. But so much of my own story is in it; I can't help wondering how true this may also be for many other men who might not care to admit it in public.

I know first hand how extraordinarily, thrillingly powerful it was to discover my own sexual centre through expanded masturbation. I know how it feels to glorify in my own body and my own experience. It's called solo sex because this is not just wanking – it's sex with my self.

My own journey with self-pleasure began a personal awakening which ultimately led me to become a trained sex, intimacy and consent coach. I now work alongside many other conscious sexuality practitioners, teachers, and bodyworkers, who understand that sex and sexual expression (solo or partnered) can be a conduit to profound self-awareness and healing.

Reading both books I was struck by the fact that the conscious sexuality community (often popularly characterised by Tantra, although that's just a tiny representation of it) and the 'bate' community each have their own language to describe what are essentially very similar physical states and experiences of profound sexual self-connection, and bliss.

The Male Voice

In *Getting Off* Armstrong examines his experiences of what happens when a man who by his own description has developed "a relationship with myself [which] is now complete and absolute" opens up his solo exploration of sexual self to include partnered and penetrative sex.

One of the most important things for me about this book (and its predecessor) is that – as Armstrong observes in his opening – there is a "dearth of literature about what men are thinking and feeling about their explorations" when it comes to their sexual expression.

Men writing articulately and honestly (not fictionalised, or for titillation) about the reality of who they are as sexual beings – their practices, desires, fears, joys, and vulnerabilities – is something that simply doesn't exist in the way it does with women's writing on the same subject. He quotes Nancy Friday saying "Even men don't know about men".

Here is a rare man daring to document the depth and breadth of his sexual experience – in all its ordinary extraordinariness. And, importantly, setting it within a context beyond his own actions or experiences. This book is as much cultural commentary as personal memoir.

The Male Gaze

What emerged for me as one of the key themes of this book was the idea of the male gaze – both outward (seeing other men as sexual) and inward (being seen as a male sexual being – by others and by yourself).

In his writing about his experiences with porn, strip clubs, bath houses, sex spaces, escorts, and even the film *Magic Mike*, Armstrong examines how much the male gaze is allowed or encouraged, how much it is fetishised, and how much it is self-reverential.

He discusses what he sees as the bravery of male porn stars – the beauty and vulnerability of a man before a camera, naked, enjoying his cock (highlighting the difference between gay and straight porn in how the male gaze is celebrated).

But, having used other men's sexual experiences to fuel his own fantasies, he also describes group sex experiences where, disconcertingly, he becomes little more than a prop in someone else's fantasy: "I wanted to be seen but instead I doubted that I existed at that very moment".

In fact this collision between the limitless, ecstatic possibility of fantasy, and the reality of physical hookups that trigger deep personal insecurities, raises interesting questions about the nature of, and need for, connection.

Connection and Disconnection

At the end of *Solosexual* Armstrong observed that “for all my talk of solosexuality, at the root of it all is still the need for connection”. In *Getting Off* he discovers that orgies and hookups are often about being desirable and being wanted – and it can be difficult when you leave them feeling neither.

In fact the safety of his own solo sex sessions often proves more compelling for him than his in-person encounters, which he frequently leaves early (despite being aroused) in order to find deeper completion and fulfilment at home with himself.

He describes fucking, in many of his partnered encounters, as “a barrier to, rather than conduit to, closeness”, and from his descriptions it’s not hard to see why – so many men going through the motions without the emotions.

Some of this is due, in part, to drugs – both recreational, and prescribed. In the second part of the book he details his experiences with PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis – a pill taken before and after sex which virtually eliminates the risk of getting HIV) which, over the last few years, has begun to open up a world of condomless gay sex not seen since the 1970s.

About PrEP

By his own admission, Armstrong’s experiences here are cautious. He suffers from severe OCD, so the reality of condomless sex takes some getting used to for him – even though the idea of it has fuelled many of his ‘bate’ fantasies. And, although I applaud his bravery in writing about his real, imperfect experiences, limited by his fears, it’s here that I found myself wishing for a little more depth and context.

Although he describes the ease of getting PrEP (a prescription from his GP), and some of its benefits (the vista of previously unthinkable sexual fantasies that being on the drug now makes a possibility), there’s no real acknowledgment of the unknown long-term effects on an HIV-free body of taking what is essentially a highly toxic chemical.

He describes (to wry comic effect) hearing-but-not-really-hearing his doctor tell him the drug is not entirely a replacement for condoms. And although he does sometimes question how safe the drug really keeps him, there’s not much examination of the implications of so many men completely abandoning the latex which is still the only realistic protection against a myriad of other sexually transmitted infections besides HIV.

His OCD does, however, limit him from engaging too intensely with another phenomenon which has exploded alongside the introduction of PrEP – chemsex.

The Drugs Don’t Work

The perceived lack of need for protection that PrEP encourages has led many men down a path with recreational drugs which is having serious impacts on their mental and physical wellbeing. To say nothing of the impact on their ability to truly connect with their own bodies, and the bodies of the men they play with.

Armstrong describes an encounter where he is the only drug-free man in a hookup group who are all 'blowing clouds' (smoking crystal meth). It's another example of real life coming a poor second to solo sex.

Despite the men all being in the same bed there is little physical interaction between them – each is absorbed in searching for more hot men in hookup apps on his phone, or fixated on the porn playing on a large screen. Eventually Armstrong makes his excuses and leaves – back to the aliveness of his own 'bate' – his exit barely noticed.

What he doesn't say is that this disconnected scene is becoming increasingly common in gay sex.

Reliance on drugs as a crutch for sex pops up in other insidious ways too. His first thought before going barebacking for the first time is to reach for the Viagra. He has discovered there are strong insecurities that go with becoming a real, physically interactive, vulnerable, flesh and blood man.

But stimulants do also form a crucial part of his solo sex. And although he fetishises the whisky he drinks while 'bating' as part of the 'rock'n'roll' fantasy, he acknowledges that "when I decide to focus less on myself during a bate and focus more on porn it's a decision made by the amount of liquor I have coursing through my body".

It's ironic that in almost every context drugs and stimulants actually seem to become something of a barrier to the full physical connection they promise to enable.

And this brings into focus for me one of the book's other interesting themes: the notion of addiction.

Addiction – Fantasy or Reality?

One of the key characteristics of the 'bate' world Armstrong describes is the enthusiastic framing of the 'bate' as addictive. Many 'bators' create powerful fantasies around the idea of being addicted to masturbation (perhaps echoing some of the fantasies about 'pozzing' – the deliberate chasing of HIV infection – that abound in connection with chemsex).

This is where fantasy and reality brutally, and very uncomfortably, collide.

Because the reality is that many men do struggle with an unhealthy relationship with masturbation and porn that negatively impacts their lives.

And – whether it fits the popular narrative of reclaimed sexual liberation or not – the reality for many gay men is that PrEP and party drugs have blurred the lines between safe sex and sex which damages lives.

Armstrong is clear that he understands the difference between fetishising the idea of addiction (rather the way porn often fetishises the idea of sex), and the grim reality of real addiction.

But, curiously, he also discovers that – for him – this fantasy of the extreme surrender of addiction is the logical and perfect opposite to the tyranny of the need to control, which is at the root of his OCD. Fetishising addiction allows him to escape.



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Jason Armstrong

Moral Judgements

These are all difficult, uncomfortable – often personally challenging – subjects to put in the spotlight. But it's also clear that black and white responses are neither helpful nor realistic.

Armstrong – rightly – questions some of the moral assumptions that tend to get made when it comes to sex, and masturbation in particular.

Many people might characterise the amount of time and energy some men spend on prolonged masturbation as 'obsessive'. But – as Armstrong points out – doesn't a singer spend hour after hour obsessively practising their craft of self expression? Why do we push back so strongly against the thought of sexual expression being an equally important craft?

Sadly, as he reminds us: sexual curiosity and freedom are frequently deemed socially unacceptable: "It is clear the last thing we want to do is tell someone they can be sexually expressive and healthy at the same time. The only condoned type of sexual expression is a very small, narrow box. I beg to differ."

Troubled Times

Armstrong opens this book with his desire to fill the silence which traditionally represents the written record of authentic male sexual experience. Later he bookends this with a more desperate impulse: "Sexuality is one of the greatest gifts... but in troubled times it gets vilified so quickly. I want to write about it urgently, needfully. Before I and other writers like me get shut down".

He's not wrong. We live in an increasingly hostile environment of legislation restricting sexual expression. And it's important to remember that restricting sexual expression almost always has a disproportionate effect on those whose sexual expression is not considered mainstream.

From ongoing 'gay purges' in Chechnya and Russia; to last year's FOSTA/SESTA internet laws in the USA forcing many sex-positive or sex-supportive websites offline; to the questionable 'Nordic model' of sex work regulation (in force in Canada where it directly impacts one of Armstrong's hookups), sexual freedoms continue to be insidiously curtailed all over the world.

The trickle-down effect of this for LGBTQI people can sometimes mean the difference between being alive, or dead. Armstrong recognises this in his commitment to donate a portion of the book's proceeds to the Rainbow Railroad, an organisation helping LGBTQI people escape countries in which they are persecuted for their sexual orientation/gender expression. www.rainbowrailroad.org

We need voices like Armstrong's to speak their truth so that millions of others can see they are not alone, no matter how uncomfortable the subject matter may appear from the outside.

Coming Back to the Self

Throughout *Getting Off* Armstrong navigates an uneasy relationship between disappointment with partnered encounters and his need for connection and community. At several points he worries that, having become something of a figurehead for solosexuals, he will be judged and rejected by his tribe for having now chosen to explore partnered sex.

Towards the close of the book, as he finds himself increasingly turning back to solo sex to find fulfilment, Armstrong asks “does the love I have for myself negate my ability to love another?”

I would argue the very opposite. As he notes, more and more people are living alone (often by choice). Western society may appear very individualistic – but that’s only on the surface; deeply ingrained cultural messages constantly tell us that we are not whole when we’re on our own.

Almost all the clients I see as an intimacy coach seek me out because they want to learn ways to have more (or better) intimate connection – be it in sex, or relationship.

But the bottom line is that most of us have lost connection to our core, uninhibited, physical and sexual self. And if you don’t understand what truly turns your own self on, if you don’t have a connected relationship with your own erotic body, how is it reasonable to expect anybody else to? In order to become better lovers, partners, playmates, we have to learn to be our own lover first.

Male Sexual Identity – Where Do We Go From Here?

Over the last decade – with the rapid rise of online porn, recreational and antiretroviral drugs – gay men have been plunged into an unprecedented challenge to the very notions of what constitute pleasure, connection, intimacy, safety, and consent. Questioning the fundamentals of what it means to be a sexual man.

Getting Off is a wide-ranging, articulate, raw, painfully honest, at times humorous, look at how it feels to be living in the eye of this perfect storm. It may be filtered through one man’s experience, but there will doubtless be parallels and echoes familiar to most men – whatever labels they have chosen for themselves.

For those interested in gay (male) cultural and sexual history I have no doubt *Getting Off* will join *Solosexual* in becoming an important reference point. It’s easy to read (though it doesn’t shy away from getting ‘down and dirty’ with language or descriptions), but Armstrong’s personable tone belies the depth of his knowledge and articulacy.

What is clear from the experience of this one man, documenting and examining his own sexual journey, is the multiplicity of male sexual expression and desire.

Sexual identity is fluid, however much we try to put it in boxes – ‘gay’, ‘straight’, ‘top’, ‘bottom’, even ‘bater’, are limiting labels.

Ultimately what Armstrong realises is that none of this matters when you open yourself and your body up to what is possible.

And this perhaps is the crux of what appeals to me about this book. Personal exploration and experimentation are essential to our learning and growth as individuals. Sex is no different. We need to learn about our own sexual selves more – and the best starting point for that can only really be our own body.

To take a cue from the titles of both Armstrong’s books: ‘getting off’ can happen in your own body, whenever you want. No partner required! Perhaps we all need to learn to be a bit more ‘solosexual’.



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Jason Armstrong

What follows is an edited compilation of extracts from a conversation between Michael Dresser and Jason Armstrong, talking widely around some of the themes from the book.

On masturbation and sex:

Jason Armstrong (JA): The internet really is a game changer. Because without the internet I'm not sure we would have experienced this propulsion towards masturbation being not just something you do quickly in the shower before work, but actually making a whole production number out of it!

The writer Xaviera Hollander writes that sexuality for a lot of people is like washing their hands – it might be something they do, even very often, but give very little thought to. But then there are people like ourselves who give a great deal of thought to it. For some people sexuality is so central, rather than peripheral, to their sense of self.

Michael Dresser (MD): And for a lot of other people they're striving to access that feeling of personal power through sex, because they've heard about it, but they don't know how to do it.

JA: I think too often people expect someone else to give them their sexuality, rather than giving it to themselves, of their own volition.

MD: And actually, in physiological terms, it's not possible to 'give someone pleasure'. You can do something to someone's body that results in their brain interpreting that as pleasure, but you can do the exact same thing to someone else's body and it will freak them out! It all comes back to what you experience in your own body.

On obsession, and addiction:

JA: I've been interacting in a discussion group online with psychotherapists. And they're talking a lot about hypersexuality: chronic addiction to masturbation or sex. So there is the possibility that something so beautiful can also be problematic for some people. But how we define problematic is often dependent on our social conditioning.

And when it comes to addiction there's very little agreement – some psychotherapists don't even claim an addiction to sex can exist. And there are others who think that porn addiction is real and needs to be treated in a 12-step programme. So there is a whole spectrum of opinions.

At the end of the day I think it comes down to whether you are a better person for having had the experience, or whether something in your life has been harmed because of it.

MD: The sex therapist Marty Klein talks about the pathologisation of sex. At what point does it become an obsession?

JA: There are people who put their work or career ahead of relationships. And we wouldn't necessarily feel bad for them – we might feel a little sorry for them that they don't have relationships, but we wouldn't pathologise it.

If you take singing away from a singer, if you take cooking away from a chef, what happens to that person? When I didn't have access to 'bating' as much as I wanted, and in the way that I wanted, I have to admit the world felt a little less colourful.

On male sexual expression:

MD: In terms of art the male nude is very often not a sexual being in the way that the female nude is. There's something about men not being acknowledged as sexual creatures with sexual desires.

JA: Yes, even in ads I've seen for Viagra, it's a woman in the throes of ecstasy that the picture shows, not the man. Because I think to show a man in the throes of ecstasy with his eyes closed, and his mouth gaping would be too much for our culture to handle at this particular juncture.

MD: Why do you think it's so threatening to depict the full male sexual expression publicly?

JA: Men are often considered pigs; dirty, in the gutter, filth. So how do you depict that in a way that also relates the joy? For example, when I'm masturbating I'm often in the gutter for sure, but there's this other part of my brain that's finding it sacred. I use the phrase 'divine filth' – where you're in the gutter but it doesn't make you a bad person. I'm concerned that we always see bare sexuality as something bad. But for me it's a connection to my higher self so how can it be so bad? It feels joyous!

I feel that sometimes we have to justify our sexuality a bit by saying we're enlightened, when in truth sometimes I just feel like a pig in the mud.

MD: Shame and shutdown go hand in hand with a lot of sexual experiences – solo or partnered. I wonder if that's part of the reason why there are so few men who've chosen to write about it and be visible in this way?

JA: I think part of it too is that men are afraid to be seen as the animals they are. When women write about sexuality I find it rarely delves into gutter talk. It seems heightened, it seems spiritually enlightened so therefore it's palatable. But I don't think a lot of times male sexuality is palatable to the masses.

MD: There's something about the animal quality which is uncomfortable for people, particularly because male sexuality has often been used to overpower other people.

JA: Yes, it was a little difficult to write a big celebration of the penis when I know the penis has been used to harm others, throughout history, in so many ways.

MD: But that's also why it's important to reclaim it in the way you've done in the book – to be able to say 'yes, but it's this too'.

On in-person sex versus masturbation and fantasy:

JA: In the book I reference a line from *A Streetcar Named Desire* where Blanche Dubois says 'I don't want realism, I want magic!' I think that's the appeal of porn over in-person interactions, a little bit.

MD: I was interested by your descriptions of the joylessness of the physical sex spaces you went into, compared to the joyousness of your experiences with the online 'bating' community.

JA: When you're not trying to get into another man's pants, but you're encouraging him to get into his own pants, a camaraderie develops. Whereas I find with partnered, penetrative sex, and group experiences, there is unfortunately – and maybe inevitably – a one-upmanship which occurs, where it's the idea of who's going to be top dog. I find with 'bators' there isn't so much concern with who's going to be top dog – we're all just having fun jacking off!

In a sex space there's often a hushed, almost church-like quality to it: we are there to worship. But with 'bators' that hushed worship entails, I think, more joy than in the partnered, penetrative parties that I've gone to, where everyone wants to land the hot guy, and it becomes a status symbol. And all that stuff takes away from the pure joy of being a guy with a cock!

MD: In person there can also be a need for validation through someone else's gaze. If no-one's looking at me I don't exist.

JA: Exactly – and with 'bators' that's pulled out of the equation, because we're not trying to pounce on each other, we're all just encouraging each other – regardless of our shape, our age, our race.... I never [web]cam – I just message with other 'bators'. Because what they're saying to me is more of an aphrodisiac than what they do, or what they look like.

For further information about Jason Armstrong visit his website www.jasonarmstrongauthor.com

More details about Jason's first book, *Solosexual*, can be found at <http://solosexbook.com> with additional interviews and articles available at <http://solosexbook.com/press-2/>

For more about 'bate life', including a further interview with Jason, visit www.thebatorblog.com/bate-life/jason-armstrong-solosexual-qa/

If you would like support finding your own sexual expression, to learn to connect better with your own body or in your relationships, Michael Dresser offers workshops and one-to-one coaching in Edinburgh, Findhorn, and London. www.michaeldresser.co.uk





Men On Film:

A Brief History of the Gay Porn Film

The weblinks included within this article are intended for a mature and consenting audience only. Anyone who is easily offended or uncomfortable with the further discussion or depiction of gay male sexuality may wish to limit themselves to the text of the article itself.

When people think of the early days of film they visualise numerous iconic scenes: a train arriving at a station; a trip to the moon; flickering chiaroscuro sets and jerky scratched films featuring ladies in bonnets and gentlemen with twirly moustaches. In the shadows of these now quaint offerings however, humans were doing what they always do with new technology – using it to record sex. The early history of film is littered with pornography from every producing country. From *A L'Ecu d'Or ou la Bonne Auberge* in France to *A Free Ride* in the US, there has been explicit hardcore sex onscreen from the very beginning. Hardcore heterosexual sex that is. Despite being depicted in art from all over the world, gay sex was late to the moving image party. Then, in 1920 in France, Bernard Natan directed and starred in *Le ménage moderne de Madame Butterfly*, which I'm sure even non-French speakers can guess the contents of. The film is a hardcore bisexual version of *Madame Butterfly* featuring every variant imaginable in the tight running time of a short film. But it wasn't until nine years later with 1929's *The Surprise of a Knight* that exclusively male-male sex was shown – albeit with one of the characters dressed as a woman.

So where do we go from this pivotal point? With so much material to cover, I thought it best to divide the history of gay porn into three sections – Movies, Video and Internet. Although there is also a world of print media out there that's crucial to the journey of the form (*Inches, Playgirl, Colt*) I'm going to focus on the moving image by highlighting just a couple of labels or filmmakers from each time period.

Movies

The evolution of gay porn as a moving image medium has moved pretty much in tandem with heterosexual porn and continues to do so. In the 1950s and 60s 'stag' films were illegal erotic works that were independently produced and exhibited in secret. These films ranged in their explicitness – from goofy stripteases right through to graphic scenes of penetration. Of particular interest to gay male audiences were the films of Bob Mizer – a famous fetish photographer already well known for his 'beefcake' images in magazines like the infamous *Physique Pictorial*. Films such as *Motorcycle Thief* and *Go Go Sailor* featured athletic young men in posing pouches, mugging for the camera and acting out fantasy scenarios. An advert for *Cop & The Purse Snatcher* in a 1962 issue of *Physique Pictorial* perfectly encapsulates his unique style in words, "Dressed as a fetching blond, the rugged motorcycle cop coyly flirts with the young hood who happens along. Sure enough the hood tries to steal the purse, but of course righteousness triumphs and the hood his punished, and is left turned."

The 1970s brought in the era of the porn cinema and with it hardcore explicit features. A number of these films unexpectedly gained brief mainstream acceptance with the celebration of all things 'porno chic' and the attendance of celebrity audience members such as Jack Nicholson and Jane Fonda. They weren't likely to be found in the gay porn cinemas of London's Soho and 42nd Street in New York however, as these locations served as both cruising grounds and screening rooms for films from directors such as Joe Gage, Peter De Rome and Curt McDowell.

Le ménage moderne de Madame Butterfly



The Surprise of a Knight

For a summary of the cinematic journey towards the likes of *Le ménage moderne de Madame Butterfly* visit: www.weirdwildrealm.com/f-different-from-others.html

For more about *Le ménage moderne de Madame Butterfly*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_ménage_moderne_de_Madame_Butterfly

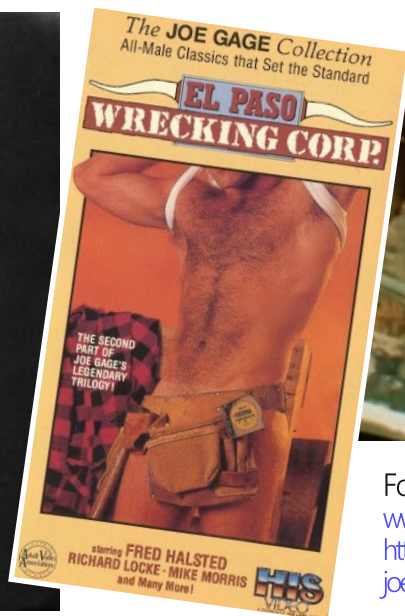
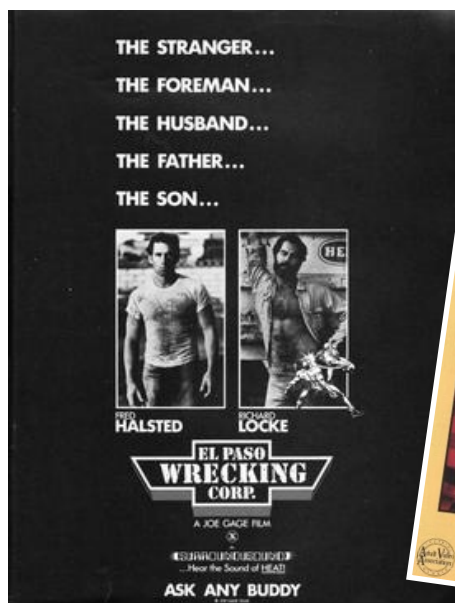
Further reading about *The Surprise of a Knight*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Surprise_of_a_Knight

Bob Mizer Foundation



Motorcycle Thief

A couple of short video introductions to the life and work of Bob Mizer can be found at: <https://vimeo.com/122850385> and https://v.kickstarter.com/1584684313_bab44018456d15d85fb37462f60ea4a98feac527/projects/826497/video-333897-h264_high.mp4



Kansas City Trucking Co

For some interesting interviews with Joe Gage visit: www.buttmagazine.com/magazine/interviews/joe-gage/ and <https://brightlightsfilm.com/keep-on-truckin-an-interview-with-joe-gage/#XmjearnqFPY>

Joe Gage is most famous for directing his trilogy of successful working men films – *Kansas City Trucking Co* (1976), *El Paso Wrecking Corps* (1977) and *L.A. Tool & Die* (1979). His films might best be described as extreme male bonding pieces featuring bro-jobs, mutual masturbation and even the odd Vietnam flashback! His films star truck drivers, construction workers and mechanics, many of whom were not professional performers. As he notes in a 2007 interview with *Butt* magazine, “The men that I have always interacted with were the phone installer, the guy down the street, the neighbor, you know, just guys.” Gage went on to direct numerous low budget horror/sci-fi films such as *Mutant Hunt* (1987) and *Robot Holocaust* (1980) under his real name of Tim Kincaid in the VHS era before returning to porn.

Peter De Rome is one of the few British-based directors famous on the scene during this era. De Rome’s films have a dreamlike DIY aesthetic and feature a range of men as opposed to a fixed type typical of other directors of the period. He filmed all over the world and films such as *Encounter* (1971) and *Adam & Yves* (1974) feature fantasy scenarios and cinematography that is sometimes reminiscent of the soft-focus dreamscapes conjured by the legendary Jesus Franco – director of *Vampyros Lesbos*. He’s most famous for *Hot Pants* from 1971, a short film featuring a strip tease with some interesting close-ups slightly echoing Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*.

Curt McDowell was a director based in San Francisco and was known mainly for his underground films similar in style to early Waters or the Kuchar brothers. His more explicit films are often autobiographical in nature and chart Curt’s sexual consequents with rough trade around San Francisco. His 1972 film *Ronnie* graphically depicts a sexual encounter between Curt and a straight man; the titular rough trade Ronnie. As frequent collaborator George Kuchar states, “His was not a cinema of dead meat; his beefcake was hot off the streets and the cheesecake was equally tart and titillating.” His work has a grainy intense quality that pre-dates the amateur boom of internet pornography by decades.

Video

The early 1980s saw the home video wars and the triumph of the VHS format over Betamax. This opened up a whole new demographic – those who wanted to watch porn but who didn’t have access to specialist cinemas or were too shy to ‘enjoy’ these in public. This technological revolution also came about in the early days of the AIDS crisis and the often-severe cracking down on gay sex establishments by homophobic authorities. As writer Alexander Renault noted, it was “a time when gay people were streaming out of their closets and fears of HIV were keeping more people at home with their VCRs, baby oil, and remote control.” Studios such as Falcon and Colt capitalized on this boom and offered slickly produced gay films to eager audiences (often at eye-watering retail prices).

In 1984 erotic writer **Jack Fritscher** created Palm Drive Video to cash in on this new market and appetite for view-at-home porn. Founding editor-in-chief of trailblazing leather and rubber fetish magazine *Drummer*, Fritscher realised there was a gap in the market for a very particular kind of male body displayed in grainy VHS. Initially conceived as a video publishing arm of *Drummer*, Fritscher instead decided to create the company under his own label. The men were rougher, older, hairier and focused on what he described as the ‘homomasculine’. Palm Drive Videos were the direct opposite of the slick muscle videos coming out of contemporary studios – they merged the men of *Drummer* magazine and the earlier films of Joe Gage into a uniquely homemade VHS aesthetic. Colours are oversaturated, the sound is muffled and tinny and the locations are real homes, garages and gardens. The models featured were real life construction workers, cowboys, bodybuilders and porn stars who fit the particular aesthetic. A print ad from the time reads, “If you’re bullish on bears who talk directly to you and stare you straight in the eye while they beat their meat, smoke cigars, piss, and act as nasty as they talk, Palm Drive might just drive your palm to XXXXtasy!”

Adam and Yves



Hot Pants

For some superb introductory articles about Peter de Rome www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/peter-de-rome-1924-2014 and www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jun/26/pete-de-rome-gay-film-maker-gielgud-warhol-bfi and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_de_Rome and www.polarimagazine.com/filmtvreviews/fragments-incomplete-films-peter-de-rome/

Loads



Ronnie

An excellent introduction to the films of Curt McDowell, also by Stuart Isaac Burnside, can be found in *UnDividingLines* issue 5 www.undividinglines.wordpress.com. Additionally, a video introduction can be found at: <https://docplayer.net/51728255-Article-archive-an-introduction-to-the-films-of-curt-mcdowell.html>

Palm Drive Video



Read *Drummer – Gay Pioneers, How Drummer magazine shaped gay Popular culture 1965-1999*, for free at JackFritscher.com www.jackfritscher.com/PDF/Drummer/Vol%204/Final%20Version%206/Pioneers_000_Book-WEB-Cover_V6.pdf

Dummer magazine has now been relaunched and can be found at: <https://drummern.com/the-once-and-future-drummer>

For more on the fascinating Jack Fritscher see www.JackFritscher.com and interviewed at <https://aomag.org/2020/03/09/jack-fritscher-cover-story>

For an introduction to Palm Drive Video www.rawuncutvideo.com

The first release on the label was *Blue Collar Men*, a documentary of real working men in various situations – pushing wheelbarrows, sawing, gardening etc. They also produced numerous muscle worship videos such as *Motosexual Homocycle* which features model Brutus slowly ripping his clothes off, pouring beer on his chest and rubbing oil over his muscular physique.

Palm Drive Videos are unique for the way they mix a particular fetish for blue collar men with a home made VHS aesthetic. In some ways they echo the shot-on-video horror market that built up at the same time – low budget illicit thrills that offer a verity that slicker productions could never hope to match.

The next label will need no introduction to anybody who's delved into the XXX retail establishments of Soho – Triga. Starting in 1997, the company was established just as the internet started to take off and VHS was still king. The label focuses on fantasy scenarios featuring working-class men such as builders, van drivers and bouncers. They were also pioneers in what became known as 'scally porn' – films featuring stereotypical representations of young disenfranchised men in sportswear in releases such as *Young Offenders* and *Crack and Cock*. The company also thrived through the DVD boom and now offers instant access on their website. Offering a very niche British product, they're a studio that has embraced distribution changes and survived where numerous others have disappeared into obscurity.

Internet

Of course the arrival of the internet changed everything. Suddenly porn could be accessed at any time and the number of homes with internet-ready computers skyrocketed. Like previous pioneering visual based technology, sex was undoubtedly a driving force and before long internet porn was king. Chat rooms and web boards offered a community connection and videos were freely shared. Downloading moved to streaming sites such as Pornhub, offering instant free access and a mix of amateur and professional porn with the accessibility of YouTube. Now anybody could become a content creator and porn star – all they needed was a webcam and an internet connection.

The internet also gave rise to some new studios, one of the most notable in recent years being Men.com. Starting in 2003, the site offers paid for videos from multiple categories including twink, hairy, straight and parody. Men.com films are very slickly produced with high production values, a focus on young in-shape men, and even guest stars from the queens of *Ru Paul's Drag Race*. The studio has recently found infamy in its Stealth Fuckers series that introduces female characters in non-sexual roles. In some ways this is reminiscent of some of the works of Tom of Finland who would sometimes introduce female characters in his scenes, normally as a jealous spurned lover or furious spouse. A line from the film *Private Lessons Part 3* in which a furious wife proclaims "Right in front of my salad?" after discovering her husband having sex with a chef has even given birth to an internet meme!

Where gay porn goes from here seems to entirely depend on technology. Virtual Reality porn is already putting the viewer in the position of performer and augmented reality porn allows the viewer to virtually project the action and watch from any angle. One thing is for sure – as long as gay people exist, gay porn will exist. As Jack Fritscher said, "Gay male porno, both on page and screen, actually reveals the heart, soul, and character of its time because it is pop culture, and pop culture is always more reflexive of the truth of the way we are. Also, gay porno has always been around. Porno endures."

Further introductory articles on gay porn films can be found at: www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/04/30/gay-porn-a-history-of-gay-porn/; www.gaystarnews.com/article/brief-history-gay-porn/; www.ilgrandecolibri.com/en/history-gay-homosexual-pornography/ and www.out.com/entertainment/2015/7/08/few-good-men-oral-history-early-gay-porn

Jersey Girl



I'm definitely a Jersey girl. From the top of my head to the tips of my toes. From day one I loved that feeling of warmth. That familiar smell and that unmistakable feeling of being hugged right to my heart.

Travelling south, the great adventure across a sea that seemed so vast and that familiar lift in my heart as we arrived and drove up the hill on the way to my grandparents' house. A house with lavender paths and sweet pea walls and bumblebees as big as my thumb...print left a few years before in that little cement wall that marked off the orchard.

And green tomatoes by the wheelbarrow-full from a greenhouse bigger than my whole street. A wheelbarrow that easily held me and my sister with room to spare for the garden forks. Giving me that first thrill of knowing I could feel like I was falling yet still feel lifted to safety.

Grandma and Grandpa seemed like they came from a history book. Grandpa would get dressed in his best suit just to drive us to town in his bronze-coloured Humber Sceptre with its tiny penknife hanging from the dash. Grandma would tell him when to pull out from the junctions because he couldn't see to his left. Right...I realised there and then that teamwork is always the answer.

And Farmer Hinault whose name I thought was spelled "E-N-O". And Mr Blampied the gardener whose name was spelled, well, I wasn't really sure. And the very old man in the newspaper shop whose name I can neither remember nor spell. Whose face matched the colour of the deep brown wooden floor, worn almost right through to the ground. Where the counter was shiny from endless exchanges of papers for coins. And sweets.

Here, I learned to choose my own direction...on...my bike...on my own. Always setting out to find Victoria Village and somehow always missing and ending up at the sea instead. It's still not easy. Riding for three miles, end-to-end, along five mile road. And racing cars down the hill to the bay to jump off the pier into the warm sea. And then remembering that I had to ride back up again. And definitely remembering that I shouldn't tell Mum about jumping. Only...she asked.

Leaving was always like having to give back the thing that I couldn't live without. Giving away my joyous soul in exchange for encroaching darkness. Learning in the unkindest way how it feels to know what I like and to know what I don't and to know that I can't always choose. Knowing that I can't go back to find that same warmth and staying away to avoid the cold that has seeped in.

...except...

Deep down, beyond the cold and the grey, there's an ember that refuses to dull.

Travelling south, the great adventure across a sea that seems much smaller, that familiar lift in my heart as I drive...myself...to that same bay. There's a girl there of about 12 and she's jumping from the pier into the warm sea. 40 years after I fell through that same patch of air into that same patch of sea. She's learning how it feels to like what she likes. Everything is exactly where I left it and exactly how I left it and is exactly the same and is exactly different.

Everything still fits around my soul like a comforting, much-loved, favourite...jumper. I'm definitely a Jersey girl.

Fiona Percy

Kevin Crowe: *Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. Could you tell us about your background: where you were born and brought up? What was your early life like?*

Fiona Percy: I was born in Thurso and, as a policeman's daughter, I moved around a lot as a child. I spent my first three years on Shetland before moving to Dornoch, but most of my formative years were in Drumnadrochit. We lived in the police house, which is now a B&B, and I went to the tiny primary school, which had only three teachers but where we got a good grounding, then went to Glen Urquhart High School. Back then Drum had few amenities so we would bus to Inverness for swimming lessons, getting a half day for it. It seemed, in many ways idyllic, but there was always the fishbowl of being the policeman's kid and I was terribly shy.

We moved to Nairn when I was fourteen. Not a great time for a teenager to move and the culture shock of going to a school whose second year class had more students than my entire previous school led to some miserable years full of angst. Looking back, I hid behind that as an excuse not to explore my apparent otherness which was really my queerness. I put my head down and focused on studying and didn't go out much, living on the borders of different cliques rather than finding my tribe. I got into Glasgow School of Art but really wasn't ready for it and after a year came back home.

After some soul searching, I did the BA Fine Art in Moray and used the time as a form of self-discovery and therapy. Art has always been my coping and exploration safe space. After three years I graduated and, with the help of some good friends, accepted who I was. I met my best friend and eventual partner while on that course, although we didn't get together until afterwards.

KC: *Why did you decide to become a textile artist? What was it about textiles that attracted you?*

FP: After graduating I got sucked back into working to pay off student bills and without realising it ten years passed. I had lost my confidence as an artist and returned to 'crafting' in my spare time. Luckily my partner got a promotion and I was able to leave work and focus on my creative development. The first thing I did was take a crochet class to learn the basics and then I got a City and Guilds in embroidery and this was a stepping stone to the Fine Art Textiles BA, followed by an MA.

I don't think I actually decided to become a textile artist, it was always there in the background. I have sewed all my life and finally realised it wasn't separate from my art, but a part of it. There is a residual snobbery around textile art and in crafts generally, with some seeing it as a lower art form, so it took time for me to own it.

Textiles are tactile, approachable and intimate yet provide barriers against the world and I am very interested in that duality. I love how they hold traces of both the processes that made them but also the life they have lived. The idea of time and connecting with the past fits especially well with fabric: a lot of the techniques I use have been passed down, parent to child, over many generations. The thread becomes a bridge.

KC: *When I viewed images from your degree show at the UHI I was fascinated and impressed by the breadth of ideas and different techniques you used. Could you take us through the process of getting the show together and the concepts behind the work?*

FP: There were several broad themes within my degree show which I have continued to develop. I was exploring the idea of place and personal heritage and how these are built up with constantly forming links, crossovers and loops. Moving around so much as a child gave me lots of layers of experience rather than a deep embedding of community and culture and I was looking for a way to express that I guess. When I returned to Shetland for a holiday a few years ago, I immediately felt at home, even though I have no conscious memory of my early years there. My mother learned how to knit traditional jumpers while we were there, and the smell of Shetland wool is a powerful trigger for me.

I am very interested in storytelling, especially traditional folk tales and myths and their multiple variations through migration and movement of people. My favourite tale growing up was in a Hans Christian Andersen anthology about a girl who takes on the task of making her brothers jumpers from nettles in order to free them from a curse. It's now believed that nettle fibre was used in Scotland before wool, cotton and silk took over, and this shows how stories cross cultures. Tales link in with trade routes and the sharing of skills and techniques.

KC: *Of all the work I've seen from your degree show, the ones I found the most powerful were the Strands of Thought sequence, and I keep coming back to those time and time again. I also noticed you describe it as a work in process. Would you like to tell us how that work came into being and what additions you have planned?*

FP: Have you ever tried explaining how your brain works? I would describe mine as a vast storage facility full of filing cabinets, each full of multiple cross-referenced files.

I spent a lot of energy trying to explain what my work was about with degree lecturers and *Strands of Thought* grew out of that. I had tried drawing mind maps then hit upon the idea of making them physical. I have used 'pin art' within my work in the past and I'm fascinated by the patterns made from essentially straight lines so wanted to try something like that. I wrote down a list of everything that was relevant to my work that I could think of at that time then assigned them each a pin/number then cross-referenced them against each other. I was very much aware that the links I saw while doing the exercise were time sensitive and dependant on where my head was at that time. So, the patterns made with the yarn between the pins were my thoughts at that specific time.

I plan to revisit them at regular intervals in the future (five yearly) and redo them so I will build a record of my changing thought patterns. I also keep toying with the idea of making something with the skeins of yarn once I have a few more. I'm hoping my knitting skills will become good enough to do laceweight Shetland patterns.

The *Strands of Identity* project which I did with the LGBT+ student group was a move on from this work which in turn developed into the participatory work I did at Proud Ness last year.

KC: *I also loved the Ribinnean Riomach stays that were exhibited at the Frames Gallery in Perth. In particular, that you link the historical designs to Scottish Gaelic music (and to Julie Fowlis, surely one of the great Gaelic singers). This seems particularly appropriate given that so much of Gaelic music was sung while the women waulked the cloth to rid it of impurities. This linking of history, music and art struck me as being quite innovative. Would you like to share with us how you developed this work?*

FP: Music and handwork are quite closely linked and both have a rhythm and repetition to them. I listen to music while I am working, and I had Julie Fowles on repeat for a long time. Her music is beautiful, and it is easy to fall into a sewing rhythm with it, much like the women singing while working in the past. It is a part of Scottish heritage that I missed out on when growing up, the gathered women singing and communal working, but it speaks to my soul.

The materials I used link directly with the songs: ribbons, silk and calico along with traditional madder for red dye. I sourced sari silk ribbon from a women's collective in India who make it to help rebuild their community. I really like that link across time and distance of women working together.

The text was machine stitched in contrast to the oral tradition of Gaelic songs and music. The stitches used to secure the woven areas are ones I use a lot, among the first I learnt and ones I could do by muscle memory alone. I feel they hold the memory of the music I was listening to while I worked. There is also something very powerful about making the same movements my ancestors did, buttonhole eyelets and cording for strength, that echoes their handiwork while reinterpreting into an art piece. It adds a value to what they created and their skills, which were functional at the time.

KC: *I note you are a member of the Edge Textile Group. Could you tell us something about the group?*

FP: I was very privileged to be selected by Edge to be one of the student exhibitors in their *Past, Present, Future Exhibition* in Edinburgh in 2016, celebrating their work in contemporary textiles since the millennium. Their members are from all over Scotland and must demonstrate working within the contemporary textile arts sector and members include several leading artists in this field. We have group exhibitions each year, the newest being *Quines* which will be in Edinburgh Central Library in March and are responses to Gerda Stevenson's poems celebrating Scottish women.

KC: *Where else have you exhibited or plan to exhibit?*

FP: My exhibition at Eden Court, Inverness, throughout February for LGBT+ History Month was my first small one person show. This exhibition is in two halves containing large 'bedtime stories' pieces and developments of work I did with the Moray student LGBT+ group into an identity-based participatory project and artwork. I had a stall at Proud Ness 2019 where I invited anyone to take part and have been working on a large piece which is due to be completed in time for the 2020 Pride event. I hope to tour this exhibition further up north.

I will also be exhibiting in Orchard Road Studios in Forres May 23rd-31st.

KC: *How do you see yourself developing as an artist?*

FP: I have several projects on the go just now as I tend to work on yearly cycles. I am continuing to explore folk tales, myths and bedtime stories especially transgressive tales and responding to them and my environment. I am studying for my MA in Art and Social Practice distance learning with Lerwick college UHI and intend to work with community groups around rural isolation, mental health and LGBT+ issues.

KC: *For those who weren't able to see Fiona's wonderful work on display at Eden Court, below is the text that complemented the exhibition.*

Destruction is necessary for transformation, it may be I deconstruct a bed, it may be I reduce plant matter to reconstitute into rope or it may be I destroy an illusion of self. Often the destruction is a reabsorption of elements. I use a combination of traditional hand working techniques such as knitting, crochet, rope making and stitch which allow me to engage physically with the work. Repeating, returning and recycling and recording through the creative process in a continuing loop.

My Civil Partnership was the first ceremony to take place in Inverness in 2006. The mattress used in the series *Marital Bed: Stresses, Strains and Stitches* was purchased by my wife and me directly after our wedding and had thirteen years' use before it was replaced. The chemises, made from the outer covering, are patterned on wedding gifts which had lain folded in a drawer since we received them. The yellow stitching echoes the original mattress seams, folds and tufting.

The twin rope beds *Twin Transgressions* were developed from my interest in folk and fairy tales, focusing on transformative and transgressive tales. Many of the previously common Trans and Drag protagonists in the tales were gathered and edited, then modified or erased, to reflect what was acceptable in society at the time. This is now being challenged and contemporary authors and storytellers are reclaiming and reworking tales to normalise gender and sexual variations at a fundamental cultural level.

The grass used for the rope was gathered over the week of the winter solstice from fields around Macbeth's hillock where he met the three witches. Wrapped in protective red thread and conductive copper it represents support and safety. Based on historic rope beds of the 'night night, sleep tight' rhyme. The wood used is from a deconstructed children's single divan, rough and unfinished underneath its cover. The ubiquitous pyjama trousers are made from this original covering including the wear and memories absorbed.

The ongoing work *Queer Coding: Proudness* developed from an identity-based social art project run with the HISA LGBT+ Moray Student Group. The information was gathered at Proud Ness 2019. It is intended to show how people identify through multiple and overlapping areas, not just the LGBT+ spectrum, giving participants a more rounded view of themselves and others.

The skeins are the artifacts of individual maps connecting points of identity drawn in yarn during the project. Removed from the signposted legend they are unidentifiable to the specific person. They are presented on doors salvaged from my first adult wardrobe. Participants were offered a choice of colours from the best known flags representing our diverse community.

The stitched work is in progress. Taken from the anonymous data gathered it has been reconfigured into a new visual code representing the Proud Ness 2019 participants. Of the fifty five people who took part in the project on the day, only twenty one are stitched so far. The finished piece will be over three metres in length.



www.fionapercy.co.uk

www.facebook.com/Threeninefive

www.instagram.com/fionapercy395

Fiona Percy



Proud Ness participation stall, 2019. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Collecting grasses, 2019. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



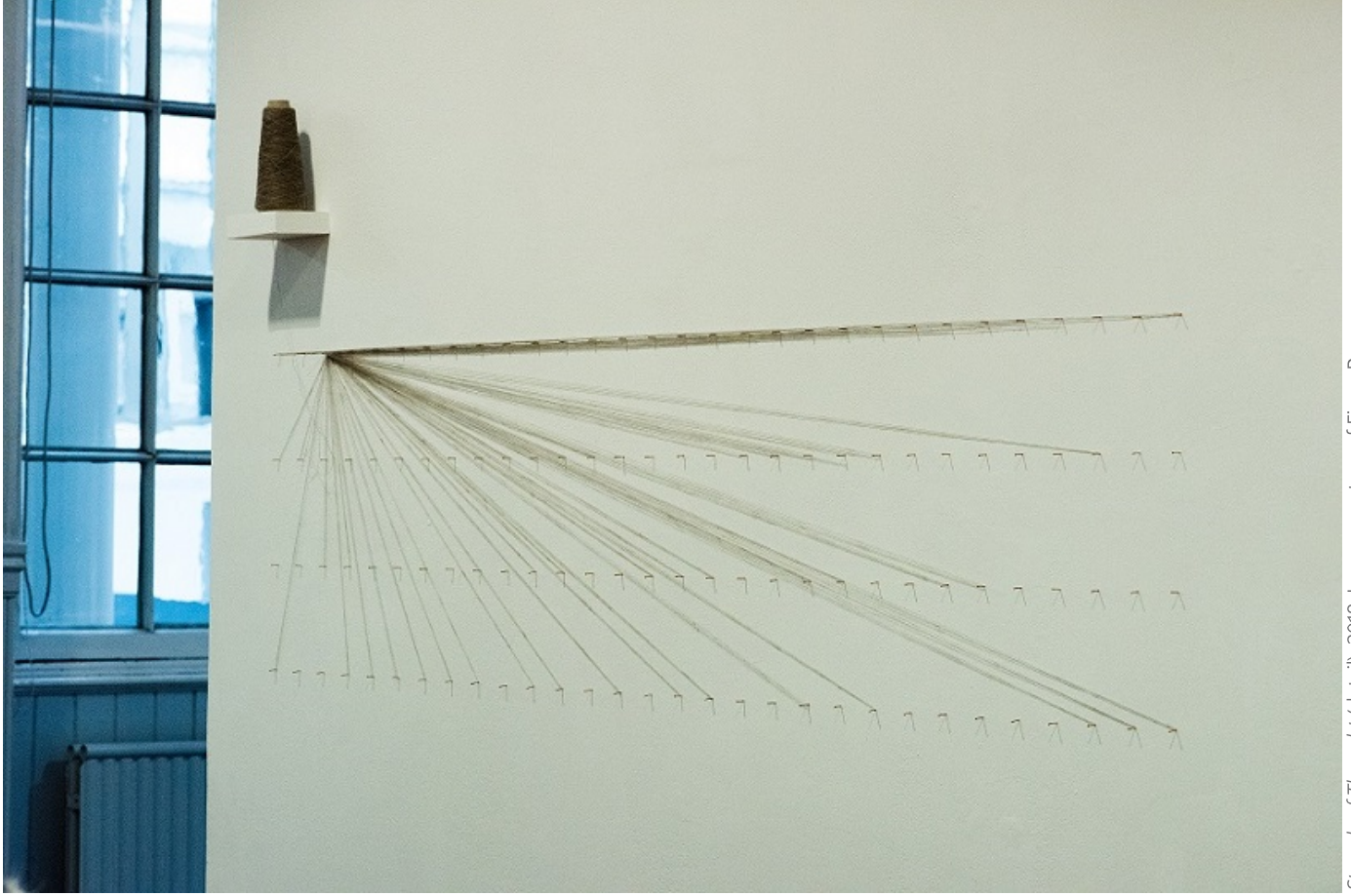
Making grass rope, 2019. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



RSA New Contemporaries private view, 2019.
Image by Julie Howden, courtesy of Fiona Percy



Strands of Thought (detail), 2018. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Strands of Thought (detail), 2018. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



TIME FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

#TIE

Last month, Time for Inclusive Education (TIE) made the 6-hour journey north from Glasgow to give their what-should-be-award-winning assemblies to our pupils from S1 to S6.

For those of you unfamiliar with the work of TIE, they are the grassroots organisation responsible for the Scottish Government making it a legal requirement for schools to be LGBT+ inclusive and to include LGBT+ inclusive education in our 3-18 Curriculum for Excellence.

The TIE assemblies involve the two founding members – Liam and Jordan – telling their stories of why TIE was founded and the importance of eradicating homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools. Liam focuses on his young daughter and how he wants her to grow up in an accepting and inclusive Scotland and Jordan tells the heart-wrenching story of his high school bullying.

Now, before the TIE guys came up to our school, I was very aware that one almost undoubtable outcome of the assemblies was that the dialogue around LGBT+ issues was going to increase in the school: from pupils, staff and probably parents, too. I'll be honest: I was concerned that the post-assembly discussions were not going to be entirely polite or inclusive. In order to prepare the pupils that attend our weekly LGBT+ group for this, we had a discussion about what to do if they are exposed to unwelcome or abusive comments after the assemblies. As often happens in group, the young people seriously impressed me with their ideas. They commented on how they would simply ignore it, knowing that to react would just spur the offenders on, or how they would challenge it or report it depending on what best suited the situation. Great; my worries reduced slightly.

The assemblies went ahead and the responses from pupils and staff were overwhelmingly positive. One Depute Rector commented that it "was one of the most impressive inputs from an organisation" that he had seen in the school and another senior member of staff said that she had "never seen our pupils so engaged". A lot of our young people also came up to me to let me know how important they thought the assemblies had been. Awesome.

Then, the following Tuesday at group, I asked our regulars: "So, how did your classmates react to the assemblies last week?" That's when I heard the disappointing stories: one kid was called gay in P.E. (which he explained was stupid because he actually identified as bisexual); another pupil told me how as soon as they'd come out of the talk a senior had asked "So, are they both poofers or what?"; and another young person reported how some of her classmates had had a discussion about "why the gays just keep going on about it".

All of these tales made me feel a bit nauseous. Had we done the wrong thing by throwing the focus on the LGBT+ community so heavily? Are we going on about it too much? And that's when something hit me, really shockingly and sickeningly powerfully. Somewhere in my core, I feel embarrassed by our activism. In other words, I sometimes feel a sense of shame when it comes to promoting LGBT+ rights. What. On. Earth?

I'm gay, I'm out; I love being gay and I love being out. I love hanging out with gay people, straight people, queer people, trans people, non-binary people, bi-people, pan-people... Then, why on earth am I harbouring this sense of unease when it comes to promoting equality for the community that I love and thought I belonged to so fiercely?

That's when the next shovel whacked me in the gut: I potentially felt this way because I grew up in a world where it was shameful to be gay, where it was wrong not to be straight, where talking about human rights and politics and equality was annoying and self-righteous and an overall pain in the neck. This is exactly what Liam and Jordan are tackling with their TIE work: the power of language and the unconscious effects it can have on us. I had just realised that I was unknowingly a victim of homophobic attitudes; I was in shock.

I'm currently 31 years old, and I realised that I was gay when I was 19. Because I was a 'late' realiser, I don't have the horror stories of school that a lot of my queer peers can unfortunately tell. I do however, massively support LGBT+ inclusive education in schools because of my late-realisation. What if I hadn't realised? What if I'd never met that first girlfriend who broke my heart but changed my life? What if I'd gotten married, had kids, and been miserably unhappy without ever working out why? What if I'd dragged my imaginary husband and children down into this pit of despair with me?

I also wonder if the reason why I never felt LGBT+ activism was that important was because I don't have any personal experience of bullying or exclusion. Pretty much every single person that I have ever come out to has responded in the most loving and accepting way. My family were great with it and even when I lived in Korea – where many people believe in 'praying the gay away' and if my employers had known that I was gay I could have lost my job – I never felt ostracised or in danger. (Dare I say that I even enjoyed the underground scene that this created? Horrific.)

I now know that this experience is an incredible privilege. And I think that it has taken me until my thirties to grow enough in order to identify the rarity of this absolute privilege and to understand that the reason that I have experienced this perfectly easy gay life is because of all the warriors who have come before me.

The number of people who have been imperative to the progression of LGBT+ rights are uncountable: Emma Goldman, the first person to speak publicly in support of gay rights; Christine Jorgensen, one of the first people to have undergone sex reassignment surgery and who used her platform to challenge prejudice and discrimination faced by the transgender community; Larry Kramer who co-founded the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), to name just three. (Check out TIE's resources to learn so much more about key moments and the incredible people involved in LGBT+ history.)

These people are the reasons why we need to keep going on about it. The people who fought for our identities and for our rights and for our growth and for our inclusion... Where would millions of us be now if these battles hadn't been forged? Where would our young people be heading if it wasn't for these advocates? What about the members of our community from parts of the globe where it is illegal and highly dangerous to simply be who they are? What about the trans-community and allies who are currently fighting for changes to the Gender Recognition Act? We have a long long way to go before sexuality and gender identities fall on spectrums that we all accept and love. Yes, Scotland is leading the way with LGBT+ education, and yes we're on a progressive path, but for those who fought for us and for those we need to keep fighting for, we will keep going on about it.

Marnie Ker is an English teacher at Wick High School. We need more progressive teachers of excellence just like her.



Jordan Daly and Liam Stevenson, Time for Inclusive Education www.tieticampaign.co.uk, Image courtesy of Marnie Ker.



TIME FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

#TIE

February is LGBT History Month, and Scotland's theme this year was "What have we learned? 20 years since the repeal of Section 28."

As part of the Winter Pride events, organised by Highland Pride, I gave a presentation in Thurso on LGBT History from a Scottish, Highland and Trade Union perspective, and covered Section 28.

Section 28 was an amendment to the Local Government Act 1988, which was enacted on May 24th 1988 by the Conservative government. It stated that a local authority "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship".

This effectively made teaching about LGBT+ history illegal as schools and councils were afraid they would fall foul of the law if they supported LGBT+ groups or taught about LGBT+ struggles. Growing up people didn't know what it meant to be gay or lesbian. They were told it was wrong and something to be ashamed of.

Many campaigners, groups and Trade Unions were at the forefront of the fight against its introduction and then the fight against its use and for its repeal.

Although it's been 20 years since the repeal of Section 28 (Clause 2a) in Scotland, that legislation has left an unwanted legacy of discrimination which still needs to be tackled today.

In June 2015, a Scottish charity, Time for Inclusive Education (TIE) Campaign, was founded by Jordan Daly and Liam Stevenson, with one aim: to combat homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in schools with LGBT-inclusive education.

In February 2016, UNISON Scotland became the first trade union to officially back the TIE campaign. Following this, the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), which at that time represented 39 affiliated trade unions and around 630,000 trade unionists, unanimously voted to endorse TIE.

In May 2016, I attended the 5th STUC LGBT+ Workers' Conference in Glasgow. The theme of the conference reflected on the distance that Scotland had come on the issue of LGBT+ equality. I was also elected onto the STUC LGBT+ Workers' committee for a year. Speakers at the conference included Jordan Daly from the TIE Campaign.

Jordan gave a very powerful, emotional and moving speech regarding his experiences as a young gay man and the background to the TIE campaign.

Jordan said that 1 in 4 (26%) young LGBT people have attempted suicide, and 54% of young LGBT people are deliberately and regularly self-harming. It became clear that education is the most powerful armoury against bigotry.

He said that with the support of the STUC LGBT+ committee, they [the TIE Campaign] could make a real difference to the lives of young LGBT people. Following this speech, the delegates voted unanimously to endorse the TIE Campaign.

After the conference I wrote to my union, Prospect, to ask them to officially support the TIE campaign and donate to them, which they duly did. I was over the moon.

When the Highland LGBT Forum embarked on its first ever large-scale Pride event in the Highlands in 2018 (called Proud Ness), and we set about planning a march, workshops, talks and entertainment, my overriding thought was to get TIE involved. I was even prepared to pay for their travel. Luckily for us they were available, and they did a joint workshop with the Highland Council Educational team, which was well attended and received.

In November 2018 the TIE Campaign succeeded in achieving its aims, when the Scottish Government announced that the recommendations of its LGBTI Inclusive Education Working Group had been accepted in full, and that LGBT themes would be embedded into the national curriculum in all public schools. The working group was set up in response to the TIE Campaign. In September 2021 LGBT-inclusive education will be embedded across the curriculum in all Scottish schools.

Having supported the TIE Campaign from the start, you can imagine my delight when I heard from a new teacher in Caithness that Jordan and Liam had visited Wick High School in February 2020. I thought it was a significant moment for the area, and totally awesome.

While all young people should feel safe and supported during their time in education, this is not always the case. All young people, regardless of their sexuality, gender identity or expression have the right to go to school and feel welcomed, included and safe. All young people should learn about all the different kinds of families and relationships, including LGBT+. This will enable them to recognise and celebrate our differences, and learn about acceptance and respect of others. It will also help them to understand that it's OK to be LGBT+, and that everyone is equal.

There is much to be proud of in Scotland's record on LGBT+ equality, but despite the progress that has been made, there is still so much more work to be done.

This is becoming more and more evident now that there are a number of prominent people, including politicians and even people within the LGBT+ community, wanting to deny trans and non-binary people the right to self-identify. It is clear from their anti-trans rhetoric they want the return of something like Section 28 but focused on trans people. It's also clear they want to prevent the teaching of LGBT+ issues in schools and are even challenging the need for LGBT+ school groups. Because, heaven forbid, people might realise they are LGBT+ and find out what support there is available to them.

Also, following a very recent event resulting in a drag queen suffering online abuse after being invited to read books to young primary school pupils in Paisley, and the fact that the school has been targeted by homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, it proves how essential LGBT+ inclusion and education is needed.

TIE's education work is ongoing, with its founders expressing that their work will not be over "until we live in a society where we are no longer required".

Our fight for our rights continues. We must always stand together, for together we are stronger, and until the day when everyone is equal then none of us are.

It remains crucial that LGBT+ people in Scotland are able to access their rights, and issues from the past should not scar the present.

Footnotes:

The STUC LGBT+ Workers' conference is organised by the STUC LGBT+ Workers' Committee, which carries out a range of work to tackle homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, and to promote equality for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans people in Scotland, both in the workplace and in society..

The conference is where LGBT+ trade union members from all over Scotland gather to determine the priorities of the Committee for the year ahead.

The following links offer further reading about the TIE Campaign and other issues raised in Sand's article:

The TIE Campaign website: www.tiecampaigh.co.uk

Wikipedia's overview of the TIE Campaign https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time_for_Inclusive_Education

A UNISON Scotland article on TIE <https://unison-scotland.org/time-for-inclusive-education-and-an-end-to-homophobia-in-schools/>

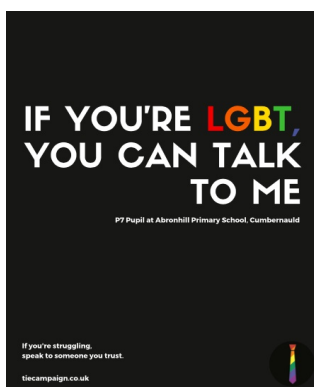
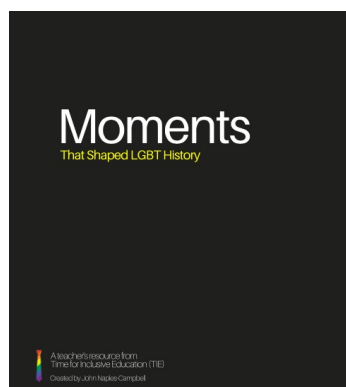
The UNISON 2016 TIE motion www.unison.org.uk/motions/2016/lgbt-members/time-for-inclusive-education/ and the STUC 2016 Congress document www.stuc.org.uk/files/Policy/CongressDecisions/Congress2016.pdf

Jordan Daly and Liam Stevenson talk about the TIE Campaign and how they are aiming to improve LGBTI education in Scottish schools. www.in2teaching.org.uk/Blogspot/View/5784TimeforInclusiveEducationTIECampaign.aspx

LGBT Inclusive Education Implementation Group www.gov.scot/groups/lgbt-inclusive-education-implementation-group/

A short film by BlueStar Streaming in association with the TIE Campaign <https://youtu.be/0X6IBNJ95xs>

TIE resources (below) are available from www.tiecampaigh.co.uk/resources





No Home In This World

Kevin Crowe

Over many years Kevin Crowe has found his eloquent and informed writing published widely online and in numerous anthologies and magazines, including frequently in *UnDividingLines* of which he is about to takeover editorship. Now, for the first time, six of his powerfully resonating works of fiction are being drawn together in *No Home In This World* and we were privileged to be given the opportunity to review the collection prior to its publication by Fly On The Wall Press later this year.

No Home In This World, the eponymous story of the collection and originally published in *Joe Stepped Off The Train and Other Stories* (Steven Kay, 2018), derives its title from a Woody Guthrie song about the Dust Bowl refugees who found themselves repeatedly confronted with social rejection, starvation and squalid slum camp conditions, yet the fundamentalist religious rhetoric imposed upon them required meek acceptance of their plight, citing the anticipated rewards in the afterlife as sole justification. Kevin Crowe's striking opening story recreates this fundamentalist attitude and sense of rejection yet without the promise of redemption now or in the hereafter.

Kevin's protagonist is deported from a driech Scotland to the starkly contrasting scorched heat of an unnamed, and ostensibly very different, country that lacks any welcoming sense of homeland security, belonging, family or community. Instead the experience of return is rooted in the deep fear inherent in expulsion. In the police state, where both government and justice system are in chaos, factionalised communities feel the brunt of sectarian violence and the broken nation seems intent on undermining what's left of the vestiges of humanity in the people caught up within it. The story's main character, as both gay and with an unspecified illness, is seen by the police as a criminal, a corrupting social danger, and as such inhabits a sub-animal position of necessarily conceded powerlessness. A sense of impotent suffocated lives stripped to their most basic elements pervades and "the stink of piss, shit, vomit and blood", and fear, is everywhere. The prevalent rhetoric of hypocrisy is the language of unjust control; it is also the language of tyranny. But what Kevin Crowe's story cleverly shows us is that this rhetoric is not simply the language of the blatant oppressor, it is also the disguise behind which 'civilised' Western democracies hide their own exclusory power, their unfairness and their repressed tyranny. Within post-Colonialist Scotland (a country that itself was once part of an empire of oppression and control) there are those who try to help deliver individual-focused justice, yet there are still too-powerful state forces that use rhetoric and deceit to undermine and disempower and reject. The refugee, it seems, remains a mere inconvenience, a problem to be argued away or negated through an exercise in verbal dexterity, in the eyes of any state – ours included – irrespective of the human consequences. Kevin Crowe leaves open the possible outcomes for his story's protagonist and consequently the resolution is passed into the hands, and conscience, of the reader and, in so doing, the choices are clear: make a stand to bring about change or stand complicit with the forces so deftly laid bare in *No Home In This World*.

Kevin's use of language offers a sparseness and precision that pares down any situation to its bare bones while still allowing the humanity within the human predicament to shine through, and the first of two previously unpublished stories in the collection, *Moonlight Sonata*, continues to demonstrate the potency of this style of writing. *Moonlight Sonata* also uses Scotland – here on the periphery of the

Second World War – as a backdrop, this time juxtaposed against the city of Coventry which bears the full force of the conflict – on its infrastructure and its people – which are ruthlessly and indiscriminately destroyed. The destruction is encapsulated in “the smell: of dust, fire, smoke, and decaying flesh” all of which penetrate deeply and are not easily forgotten or erased. People are again the victims of decisions made elsewhere and by others, with individuals seemingly impotent to prevent, influence or escape the consequences. The story gently weighs the subjects of war and art, love and loss, power and powerlessness, state and the individual to show that despite the potential in brief moments of joy and the possibility of rebirth, humanity remains ill-equipped for, and unequal to, the harsh injustices life inflicts and everyone is doomed to exist under an imposed misery when power is the prerogative of the few not the many and human life is considered disposable.

The Roots Of Their Raising is the second story to be published for the very first time. Although its title was inspired by a Merle Haggard song the tale it tells could not be more different. From the very outset the story is pervaded by the dynamics of inter-personal conflict, where emotion and intimacy are masked by antagonism and confrontation, which in turn become a fetish behind which to hide vulnerability. The human dynamics of attraction are continuously distorted and undermined, in sharp contrast to spring itself which blooms naturally regardless. Both protagonists share childhoods that continue to impact them, knowingly or otherwise, well into their adult years and the denouement is no less striking – perhaps even more so – for the fact that it might be sensed from earlier in the story, yet the reader is powerless to prevent it playing itself out and the final scene still packs a powerful punch when it reminds us of Kevin Crowe’s desire for everyone to question the values and injustices society inflicts on those it deems ‘guilty’ and the even greater consequences for those who are considered wholly ‘innocent’. Again it is up to the reader to try to unravel, and find resolution amongst, the unsettling conflict of feelings with which the story leaves us.

No Smoke Without Fire, previously published in *Laldy* (Clochoderick Press, 2018), perhaps more inescapably than any other story in the collection sets the fundamental and irresolvable issue of justice firmly in the hands of the reader. Accusations of sex with a minor generate immediate, preconceived and reactionary responses towards the ‘required’ attribution of guilt and innocence, an insatiable desire for outrage and condemnation, along with the non-evidential construction of believable justification for these prejudices, too often fuelled by the loaded rhetoric of trial by social media and sensationalist tabloid headlines. As with the Kevin Crowe’s other stories, there is no easy solution to be found in *No Smoke Without Fire*, no ‘right’ answer, and Kevin’s destabilisation of the predictable and unthinking kneejerk response is set against the more circumspect awareness of the enormity of the almost impossible task of untangling the moral and ethical threads of the story rather than adhering to the desires of overwhelming social judgment. Every character has their reasons, every character has their beliefs, and the future of every character is implicated in the events and their outcomes. Is unravelling the truth necessary in order for justice to be delivered? And what sort of justice and for whom? Justice is no simple thing.

The Dinner, commended for the Val Wood Prize and published in *UnDividingLines* (2018), steps back into our shared Colonial past where ‘lesser’ beings were used as object, ornament and possession, primarily for reasons of status. Yet, this time, it is the ego and ignorance of the pompous Tory MP protagonist, ironically, that must face the inescapable consequences of “the difficult, or [...] impossible, position in which he finds himself [...] the victim of dishonest conduct [...] and] treated as an inferior” The tables have turned and the collective efforts of those with power are now found being used in favour of the oppressed, with a forward stride towards the abolition of the slave trade. It is unequivocal that justice, for once, has been rightly served.

The final story in the collection, *Texan Condoms*, originally published in *Disclosures: Rewriting the Narrative of HIV* (Stewed Rhubarb Press, 2018) takes us back to three key years in the HIV pandemic: 1979, 1989 and 2017 which, respectively, mark the period when HIV was beginning to wreak its havoc unknowingly behind the scenes, the emergence of (for some) life-saving combination therapy, and the start of the PrEP and U=U era. By travelling between the changing perspectives of engagement prevalent during these three close yet distinct times we are transported from the era of chance, through the key period of negative rhetoric and powerless towards the rewards of positive change brought about by unified efforts and, ultimately, to the justice of effective prevention and treatment. It shows that, together, if we stand and fight, if we are defiant and resolute, we can bring about justice despite the powerful few who might choose to deny us it.

With each story in *No Home In This World*, Kevin Crowe places an arm around his reader's shoulders and guides them into places they are unlikely to otherwise have travelled. It is only as the stories progress that it becomes clear he actually has his reader by the scruff of the neck and, even after each story is through, refuses to release his grip. Reticence, complacency and apathy stand for nothing. We are all culpable, and we are all accountable.

Kevin Crowe's spare, though perfectly poised, prose ensures these stories are not cloaked in unnecessary detail nor softened by conspicuous literary pyrotechnics; they are raw and unapologetic and unforgiving and skilfully crafted. The inherent brutality is both explicit and implicit. His characters, who we might usually expect to inhabit the shadows, have the spotlight trained on them, revealing in sharp relief facets of humanity that we too often choose to ignore or cower from when confronted.

Repeatedly in these stories power and rhetoric and injustice are shown to be stacked too heavily against too many by too few in predicaments not of their own choosing. And the fact that the overwhelming element of chance plays a decisive role allows the reader to recognise how easily each of Kevin Crowe's characters might so easily have been spared being condemned to the status of 'other', not become people lost on the periphery and, as such, how closely their lives and ours are connected. Collectively these stories build to create their own powerfully disturbing world which increasingly takes on a shape we might begin to recognise, one not just of isolated individual injustices but one in which wider national and social injustice has become increasingly endemic.

No Home In This World is a powerful debut from a forceful writer with a robust social conscience and an acute awareness of the complex difficulties we face as we attempt to negotiate life's realities. It's an inescapably powerful collection that will unsettle yet also has the chance to empower. It gives voice to those who are too often left unheard in an age of virtual detachment, complacency and indifference, and it is vital that these voices are not just heard but their warnings heeded.

No Home In This World will be published in June 2020 by the independent Fly On The Wall Press who, in the meantime, have shared a short interview with Kevin Crowe: www.flyonthewallpoetry.co.uk

Amnesty International UK works to protect people wherever justice, freedom, truth and dignity are denied. They investigate and expose abuses, educate and mobilise the public, and help transform societies to create a safer, more just world. www.amnesty.org.uk

Kaleidoscope Trust works with frontline activists to uphold the human rights of LGBT+ people in countries around the world where they are discriminated against or marginalised due to their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression. www.kaleidoscopetrust.com

Beyond The Black

Jane B Patten



I arrived early; I always do, I like a good view. The coffin was already in position in front of the altar; an elaborate arrangement of flowers on top and several wreaths propped up in front, ready to catch the attention of the mourners as they entered. The funeral attendants fussed around, tweaking a stray bloom, leaving service sheets on every pew. Clothed in their solemn black they looked like nothing more than a flock of gloomy crows until chattering between themselves, they laughed aloud in the empty—almost empty—church.

It wasn't like that in my day; then there had only been old Archie, pressed into service as gravedigger, and young Robbie, his mate, to settle me to my eternal rest, although in truth they fairly tipped me into my grave with precious little ceremony once the minister had gabbled through the few words he thought necessary. Dr Carruthers—Thomas—had stood silent as they went about their business and I had been glad of his presence.

I peered from my perch on the windowsill. It was wide enough to offer a deal of comfort and I lounged at ease, my back against one wall, my feet propped against the other.

People were coming into the church now; the bereaved with their red eyes being guided by the crows gliding slowly up the aisle to best seats in the house and the merely curious choosing pews near the back. The minister comes in; he's a rotund fellow, usually quite cheerful but of course today his face is a solemn mask. I wave at him; I always do but he never sees me. He begins to speak. "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today to remember the life of—"

A figure popped up from the coffin, an older lady, her hair in a wispy bun as white as the shroud the undertaker wrapped her in. She looked somewhat lost and confused. My cue, I think.

I waved to attract her attention then beckoned her towards me.

"What's happening? What is this place?" she asked.

"It's your funeral," I said bluntly. I've done this before and learnt there is no point in trying to soften the blow. "And this is St Stephen's...don't you recognise it?"

"But I was in the hospital?"

"And you came out of it in a box." As I said—blunt.

The old lady turned her attention to the congregation. "I don't like that hymn," she grumbled. "I wonder why they chose it." She nodded towards a younger—and living—version of herself sitting in the front row. "My daughter," she explained, "and that's my husband next to her, my son, then their families."

I made a noncommittal noise; there was no point hurrying her, it wasn't as if we didn't have all the time in eternity.

Her gaze lifted to take in the entire congregation. "There's an awful lot of people here, far more than I would have expected, although there's quite a few I don't recognise."

"Ah. Well. Many of them are like us. Not living," I added as she looked puzzled. Some people grasp it quicker than others.

"Are they ghosts? Can nobody see them?"

"Erm, we don't really like the G-word. Think of them... you... us, more as spirits. We can visit places we went in life, and now in...not life...we can still go there, or not, as we wish. And no, most people haven't got a clue."

"So, you're de—not living?"

"Indeed ma'am, as are you." I find a little reinforcement never hurts.

"But who are all these people? And why are they at my funeral?"

"Oh, they're here most of the time; they're comfortable, they just don't want to move on. Many of them are buried hereabouts, although not him," I point to a chap in a drab serge uniform jacket with the barest flash of kilt visible as he sat in the pew. "Corporal Innes McHugh, Cameron Highlanders, he's in France. In pieces. And him—" I indicate a portly, pompous-looking man. "That's Crombie of Crombie; he joined us in the act of bedding his mistress in the Blue Bedroom of Crombie Castle while his wife entertained visitors in the Drawing Room below—such a scandal! Don't worry, if you stay, you'll soon get to know who's who."

"But I don't even know who you are?" She regarded me quizzically. "You don't look dressed for a funeral; that jacket is very bright and your trousers, well they're hardly decent, are they, young man?"

I huffed and flicked at the remembered mud which once coated the scarlet material. "I'm Captain William Curtis and this, ma'am, is my uniform, proudly worn in the service of my king, His Majesty, George II."

She looked startled. "King George the second! You've been dead almost three hundred years!"

I winced; but let the uncomfortable word pass this once. "Two hundred and seventy three. The year was 1746, there was a skirmish upon a cold and blasted moor not four miles from this town, I survived the day, only to succumb to the corruption which grew from a scratch I received there." I rubbed my belly; I could still feel the flesh wound. It should have been nothing, yet my name was writ upon that blade that day and despite the army surgeon's best efforts; it was to no avail. Poor Thomas; I remember his tears.

She scowled at me; ah well, a sore point still it seems.

"But tell me this—oh listen!"

Whatever she had been going to ask me was lost as she turned her attention to the minister, who was speaking again.

"Moir was the only child of Alex and Catherine MacDonald. She grew up in the city—although of course, it wasn't a city in those days—a happy childhood, before she headed south, all the way to Glasgow to train as a nurse. Alas, she couldn't complete that training; her mother took ill and she returned home to care for her, shortly afterwards marrying Roderick Kennedy and enjoying over fifty years of marriage."

"Pah! Even now they twist it," my companion hissed.

I looked at her, yet before questions even formed on my lips, she continued.

"They made me; they made me come home and give up—everything."

"But surely your duty, to your mother?"

"Duty? What duty? There was nothing wrong with her! The truth of it was, I fell in love and they didn't like it. Roddy's father, and mine, had dreamed of us marrying since we were young. My father had no son to leave his business to and he thought Roddy would do well in it. He was right too. And then, later, I heard my lover had died."

"My commiserations, ma'am," I said.

"It was all such a long time ago; I had my children, perhaps it was for the best."

"That may be so," I answered, I mean, really, what else could I say. My life had not been that of a husband or father; I knew only the excitement and privations of soldiering.

While talking, we had moved to sit at the steps leading to the pulpit. We could still see the coffin and the minister, but the congregation was hidden from us. That's why we missed the new arrival.

They had walked almost the whole length of the aisle before we noticed them, even then, I was only alerted by the sharp intake, not of breath as such, but shock, from my companion.

"Catriona!"

Giving me not a glance, the old lady moved purposefully towards the newcomer standing in front of the coffin. As she did so, the shroud she had been clothed in faded and changed until she was wearing something I can barely describe as a dress, so short was it and leaving so much of her legs exposed. Her hair, no longer white and wispy, was a rich brown and swung, long and luscious, over her shoulders. She clasped the newcomer to her and kissed her. Thoroughly.

In every pew, the—not living—burst into applause, although I did notice Crombie of Crombie turning a vivid shade of red as he tried to say something to his neighbour. No one was listening.

Moira turned back towards me. The lines and cares of her years had disappeared and she was as she had been sixty years before, young and free. I waved to her, then made a shooping motion with my hand, bidding her farewell.

Moving to stand in front of her children, Moira gently hugged each of them in turn; perhaps they would feel it, be aware of a warm movement of air on their cheek, a sense of... something, or perhaps they wouldn't.

Letting them go, she took Catriona's hand, and together they started back down the aisle as the congregation began to sing.

One day, perhaps it will be me; perhaps Thomas will come.



Sarah Burton

Your Time Is My Time

Tik-tik-tik-tik, tik-tik-tik-tik

'To Jack

from Mother and Dad

Best wishes

April 4th 1929'

Tik-tik-tik-tik, tik-tik-tik-tik

A rhythm so fast

It doesn't match your

Rhythm so slow

mismatched time

Tik-tik-tik-tik, tik-tik-tik-tik

I'm the timekeeper now

I keep this time at a distance

Old and too precious to waste

Endlessly marking out new time

Tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik

29 years later

Another rhythm, quieter, like you

One that I recognise

And one that I love

Tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik
The only sound as I watch you
From behind an impossible door
Willing you to give me some...time
"I see you", but your eyes are closed

Tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik
I'm the timekeeper now
I keep this time very close
Old and too precious to waste
Marking out nobody's time

Tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik
Three o'clock on your watch
Is three o'clock on my watch
Quality time on your watch
Is quantity time on my watch

Tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik
Your watch marking
is my watch talking
Telling our story
That you are just writing

Tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik, tik-tik
I'm the timekeeper now
I keep our time in constant motion
Your time is my time
And my time is now.

The Wedding at Durness

We went to Durness to see an old friend finally hitched

Durness

Fathomably far from here

Takes two days

And in two days you can go most anywhere

But we choose Durness to see an old friend wed

So

The sleeper train

And yes – this should be Gard de Nord or Petersburg

But it's Loughborough

Every journey starts with a single step

The guard is solicitous

Spots I'm traveling solo with a small child

Asks if I'd like a drink from the bar

And unasked brings back chocolate too

My daughter – fought and lost the battle for the upper bunk

Sits crossed arms

Determined to stay awake

Determined to not miss anything

And in five minutes flat is flat out

Spotty leopard rescued from a rucksack

Sprawling on a pillow

I want to stay awake
Want to make sure I don't miss anything
But
The baileys and the lullaby of train on track
Spoon me into sleep
Morning and same guard – same smile
Brings croissant and coffee that's almost good
Inverness is cold
I guess it's always cold
Natives favour fleece and bobble hats
And my city sharp coat simply isn't cutting it
So – in the spirit of enquiry and to avoid hypothermia
We go to see if Scottish McDonalds are different to English
Spoiler alert – they're not
But they are heated
We are waiting for other guests and the one taxi from the village to
take us to Durness
And then we drive
Dear God we drive
Head left into a landscape of lunar lunacy
No trees
Boulders big as houses dropped from leaden skies
We have champagne and gossip and a driver who chimes in with
stories of people we don't know yet – but after tomorrow will
Tonight is the pre-wedding party wedding party party
A night where I get so drunk
That
A stranger – efficient crofter's wife efficiently puts my daughter to bed
And doesn't judge

Another morning and I leave my daughter telling tales of pony
derring do to a new found friend

I take a hangover so tangible

That

It pads beside me – spirit pet

To the beach

Vast expanse of white sand and rocks that cry to be climbed

And empty

Later someone says

"It's good we don't have the weather here, otherwise our beaches
would be overrun"

An interesting approach from someone who works for the
Highlands Tourist Board

But

I get it

This beach cannot be gentrified with bars and loungers and
deckchair hire

This sea says come on in if you're hard enough

Walking on the one road that takes you to and from Durness

I see cars heading for the hotel

Cars heading for the wedding

And I have two jobs

Don't cry

Read the poem nicely

I keep the tears in check until the very end

When neighbours stand and cheer

And I think about how much Kevin and Simon have lost to be in this
place here

Friends

Jobs
Families
But here
If you work hard
Stay the winters
Don't go mad
They will let you in
And they do
Work hard
Sell books
Make cakes
Stay sane
Finally living in a place where you are judged for what you do and
not what people think you do
The after party is like every party
Ebbs and flows of conversation
Confidences
Instant intimacy with strangers
At some point in the day my daughter arranges to go and ride a
naughty pony
And when I look askance
The other mother smiles, shrugs, whispers in my ear
"The pony is 27, no real threat"
Which is why next day I find myself at a stranger's table
She an incomer too
Keeps trying to make a garden
Fails
But tries again

And she says

"Living here's so hard, the only currency that counts is kindness"

But

It's not for me

Landscape too large

Or

Maybe I'm too small

But

We did come and see and see a dear friend wed.



Cathi Rae describes herself as a 50ish teacher and aspiring writer and parent of a stropky teenager, and carer for a confused Bedlington terrier and a small selection of horses who fail to share her dressage ambitions. She is interested in contemporary fiction but finds herself returning to PG Wodehouse when the chips are down.

Cathi's poetry and fiction blog, Rubies and Duels, can be found at www.rubiesandduels.wordpress.com and her collection Your Cleaner Hates You and Other Poems is available from www.amazon.co.uk/Your-Cleaner-Hates-other-poems/dp/1999810414/

To hear more from Cathi, on subjects as diverse as poverty, transvestitism, homelessness, love, and consumer culture, listen to Greg Scorzo's interview at www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaOpvDQp0ps



The LGBTI+ Elders' Social Dance Club, Inverness

'Wonderful!' 'Hilarious!' 'Such good fun!' 'Truly life-affirming!' 'So liberating!'

'I really look forward to the Social Dance Club each month!'

'The Eden Court team makes us feel a million dollars!'

These are some of the superlatives describing a new phenomenon for the LGBTI+ community in the Scottish Highlands – the LGBTI+ Elders' Social Dance Club, meeting monthly on Sunday afternoons in the cosiness of either the Maclean Room or Studio 2, Eden Court Theatre, Inverness.

When I first heard of the new dance project during Glasgow's Luminate Festival on May 1st 2019, whilst attending the première of the film *Return To The Closet*, a moving documentary on the fears of older LGBTI+ folk contemplating ostracism and stigma in residential care in the southwest of Scotland, I assumed that most of the LGBTI+ folk in Highland would be too shy, embarrassed or self-conscious to get on to the floor to shake a leg. I still don't know how she did it but Lou Brodie, one of the Eden Court team, got almost everyone up to dance that very first meeting on May 26th in a surge of enthusiasm. In fact, I was so busy dancing that I scarcely had time to enjoy the lovely refreshments laid on for us all – cream teas, cheese and biscuits, wine even, and hot and cold drinks.

No one is compelled to dance. Some of the group just enjoy watching the others' big smiles on the floor, chatting, making new friends and acquaintances, feeling valued and cherished by the wonderful folk on the team such as Lou and Amy Watt, our Eden Court leaders, assisted by colleagues Maili, Tiffany and Shona, and Lewis Hetherington from the Glasgow-based National Theatre of Scotland. We were privileged at the first meeting to meet Bec and Andy from All The Queens Men from Melbourne, Australia and whose amazing vibrancy, energy and kindness warmed the hearts of us all. The Club is not restricted to the over 65s. Younger partners, friends, family and allies are welcome too. The venue is wheelchair-accessible and disability-friendly. We are a real rainbow family in every sense!

We celebrate each month with a toast of Prosecco or alcohol-free Nosecco. Lou and Amy update us with events at Eden Court in which we might be interested. Over the past 10 months we have been given the opportunity as a group to see Sir Ian McKellen's wonderful one-man show last August; *Red Dust Road* in September, the play based on Scottish Makar, Jackie Kay's courageous memoir; then in November, the hilarious musical stage show *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* and a beautiful gay film *And Then We Danced*; and during LGBT+ History Month/Highland Winter Pride's festival in February 2020, the inspirational film *Pride* recording the support given to a Welsh community by a group of compassionate young gays and lesbians during the harrowing Miners' Strike between March 1984-85. Several of the Dance Club attended the Scottish Queer International Film Festival's Archive Film event at Eden Court yesterday evening, February 28th, at the time of writing. An Art Exhibition of Fiona Percy of our Inverness Dance Club and portraits and films of Fiona with her wife Kay, along with accordionist Julia of the Inverness Club and Jay, Colin and Stuart of the Glasgow Club are currently on display in Eden Court's galleries during History Month.

Our Inverness Dance Club hosted our sister Club from Glasgow back in October, accompanied by Karen and Lewis of The National Theatre of Scotland and Justin Meechan of All The Queens Men who, with Bec Reid, set up the LGBTI+ Senior Social Dance Project in Australia. There have been to date, several pop-up Dance Club events in Ayr, Caithness, Dundee, Edinburgh and Perth with further events scheduled at An Lanntair, Stornoway's Arts Centre, in March and a return to Lyth Arts Centre, Caithness in April. The Glasgow Club are to host the Inverness group on March 1st.

The culmination of the LGBTI+ Senior Social Dance Club takes place in mid-June with **The Coming Back Out Conversation** afternoon between 1-5pm on **Thursday, June 11th** with LGBTI+ Elders and guest speakers from Industry concerned with Care Services and Health provision, to be held at The National Theatre of Scotland, 125 Craighall Road, Glasgow and the grand **Coming Back Out Ball** at Glasgow's Old Fruitmarket, Albion Street, Glasgow from **7pm on Saturday, June 13th**. Tickets for both events are obtainable from The National Theatre of Scotland. Tel: 0141-221-0970 (10am-5pm Monday to Fridays) and on their website.

Please note: As this article was written before the current Covid-19 outbreak, we strongly advise that you check with the organisers for details of the likely postponement or cancellation of the events mentioned.

It is never too late to join the Dance Club! A warm welcome awaits you all every second Sunday afternoon between 2-4 pm in the Maclean Room, Eden Court Theatre, Inverness. Regular updates are available on the websites of Eden Court Theatre and The National Theatre of Scotland.

Eden Court www.eden-court.co.uk/event/the-lgbti-elders-social-dance-club

The National Theatre of Scotland www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/production/lgbti-elders-social-dance-club/

The Coming Back Out Ball www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/production/the-coming-back-out-ball/

Details of The National Theatre of Scotland's Portraits of an LGBTI+ Generation project can be found at www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/behind_the_themes/portraits-of-an-lgbti-generation/



The team behind the LGBTI+ Elders' Social Dance Club, Inverness

#ORKNEYPRIDE

Orkney's first Pride was scheduled to take place on the 27th June 2020. Owing to Covid-19 it has now been postponed until 2021. Emery's article was written prior to the coronavirus outbreak.

When I think of Pride in Orkney, I think *sea change*. Which is not to imply that the lapping waves have left the shores smooth. Orkney is not a once-homophobic place, now homophobia-free: it's not that simple.

LGBTQ+ folk have always been here, but quietly tucked in their own spaces, coupled or closeted. Part of this is because of the quietness of Orkney in general. Orkney's workaday patter resembles the fiddle tunes of its folk music tradition, always circling back to familiar refrains. *Whit like the day? No bad, buey, no bad*. Folk here are unlikely to demonstrate 'pride' of any kind, which is no terrible thing.

Under ten years ago, I was coming to terms with myself – and coming out – at school. First: 'I like girls.' Next, the word: *lesbian*. I tried it out as a self-deprecating joke, and was surprised at how right the word felt in my mouth. There were other queer teenagers in my year, some I knew about, some I didn't. Some didn't know themselves. Most of the time, it wasn't spoken of.

Oh, we tossed the word 'gay' around, but usually divorced from its meaning. 'Gay' was an insult, we agreed, but this did not necessarily imply that gay people themselves were bad. 'Gay' was a signifier without a signified. *This desk is gay. That pencil case is gay*. I still don't know if the graffiti on the lockers pronouncing me a 'lesbian with AIDS' was intended as an outing or if it was just the meanest-sounding insult the author could come up with.



Image: Diana Leslie

It took a long time to recognise that this was no distinction that mattered: either way, it was homophobic harassment. It took longer still to understand that our particular usage of the word had a psychological effect – on the school population as a whole as well as on myself. Not merely because we were associating gayness with something negative, but because we were *disassociating* the word 'gay' from *any* meaning. If 'gay' was meaningless, a joke, then the imagined possibility of gay existence shrank to nothing.

Luckily, I had the Internet. I watched *The L Word* and *Queer As Folk* and dreamed up my own possibilities for gay existence in a big city far away from here. Reality ensued: my university life on the mainland did not furnish me with the utopian queer found family, parade of dreamy soft-butched girlfriends, and endless brunches I had envisioned, and after five years I landed back at home. But in Orkney, something had already shifted.

By chance, I met a queer nonbinary artist called Jenny Sprenger who encouraged me to establish a social network for LGBTQ+ folk in Orkney (named NetworQ Orkney). Simultaneously, a group for LGBTQ+ teens emerged at the local Youth Café, led by Diane Currie (now our Pride committee's chair). The performance poet Harry Josephine Giles came to town to perform their decidedly queer live show, DRONE, to a massive turnout and raucous applause. ORSAS (Orkney Rape And Sexual Assault Service) opened an Equality Hub on the high street with a window display of rainbow flags and badges. Gay existence in Orkney was being imagined, discussed, *demonstrated*.

There are, as there have always been, LGBTQ+ folk in Orkney who are content with their own niche, comforted by the quiet rhythms and refrains of Orcadian life and talk, who do not need their identities reflected back to them, nor a march and a band to feel whole. And there are LGBTQ+ Orkney folk like me who genuinely believed they might be the only ones and that the only way to live a fulfilled life as a queer person was to get out. For us, seeing what promises to be a very Orcadian Pride celebration – rainbows on Broad Street, local music, face-painting, the strong possibility of weather disaster – will be a revelation.

For LGBT History Month this February, we began our fundraising campaign for Orkney Pride with a Pink Foy: an evening of poetry, music and performance. In the warm glow of a hotel function suite, against the backdrop of our patchwork Orkney Pride banner, the opening act, writer Tim Morrison, made a crack about how he'd nearly mixed up the date.

"I've been waiting 37 years for this!" he said.

I realised with a swoop just how not-alone I was, and how important Orkney Pride could be.

Emery Amber Kennedy is a teacher and creative type currently working as a Communications Co-ordinator for Orkney Pride. For more information on Scotland's most northerly Pride, which has unfortunately now had to be postponed until 2021, visit Facebook www.facebook.com/prideorkney, Twitter <https://twitter.com/prideorkney>, or Instagram www.instagram.com/prideorkney, at @prideorkney. The Orkney Pride logo was designed by Gina Ramsay.

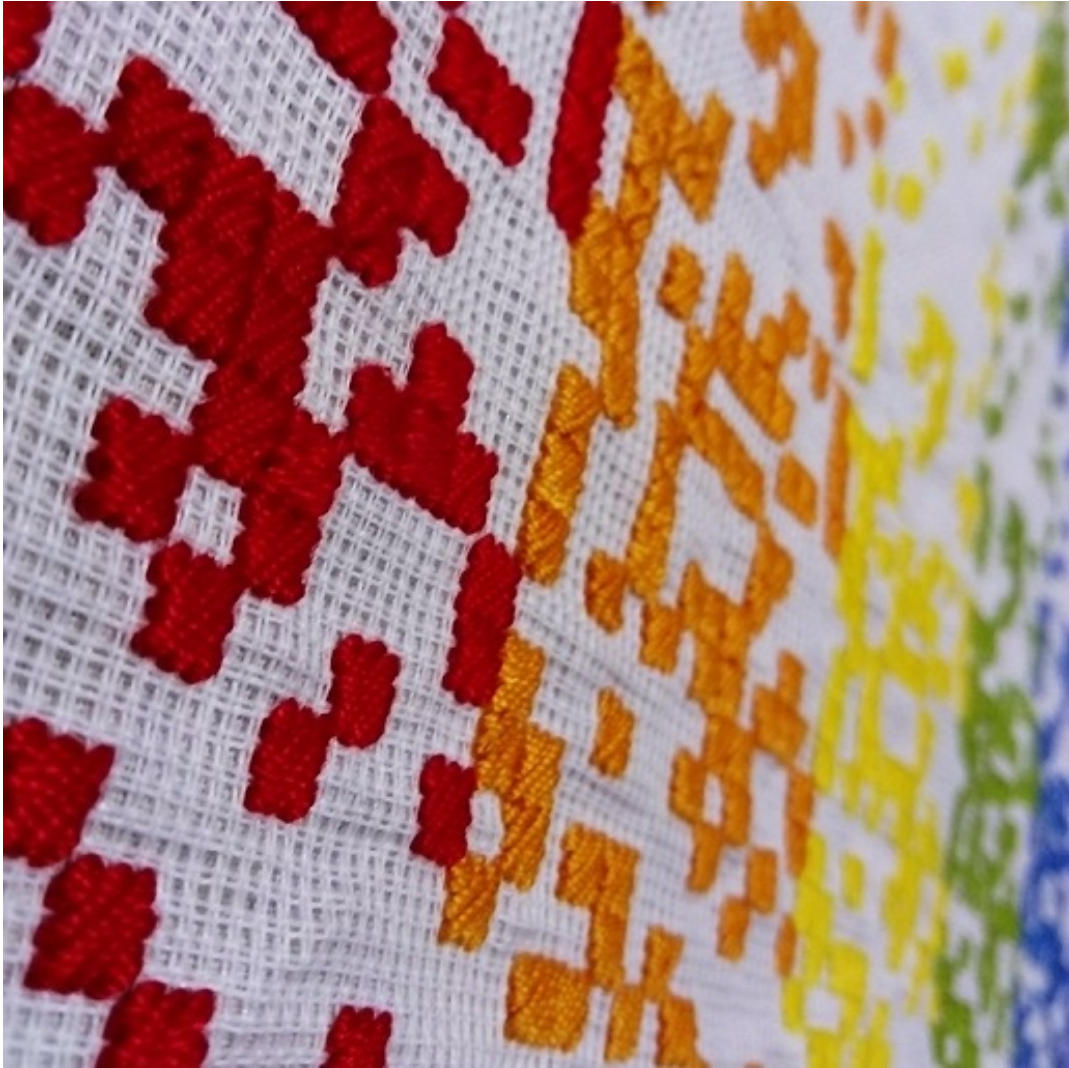


Image: Diana Leslie

Fiona Percy



Queer Coding - Proudhess, 2020. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Queer Coding - Proudhess, (detail) 2020. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Marital Bed - Stresses, Strains and Stitches. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Marital Bed - Stresses, Strains and Stitches (detail). Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Marital Bed - Stresses, Strains and Stitches (detail).
Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Marital Bed - Stresses, Strains and Stitches. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Ribinnean Riomach (detail), 2017. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy

Ribinnean Riomach (detail), 2017.
Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Ribinnean Riomach, 2017. Image courtesy of Fiona Percy



Swag

It's party time. I'm all dressed up, fancy like, and looking forward to a night of mingling, people watching, dancing and drinking. I hear a local band is playing in the Tavern, which should be fun. Nothing like a good boogie to start the night off, to distract you from your troubles.

You wanna know what I'm wearing huh? Use your imagination, and I'm wearing something a hundred times better. Totally on trend, I am. Cost me a bloody fortune though. Luckily the old lady gave up some of her cash so I could pay for it all. Tricks of the trade, tricks of the trade, my old lovely!

I'm so totally looking forward to tonight. I'm gonna get the bus there. Always loads of people hanging around at the station, and a fun way to start the evening.

I'm a people person me, love watching them, checking out their fashion sense and their latest gadgets. I love all that bling! Let's have it!

Here I am, waiting at the bus stance with some old biddies. There's some boisterous teenagers hanging around causing a distraction. A couple of 'em start acting up, banging into people, knocking bags over. I help pick up some bags, and try and calm people down. Eventually the youngsters bugger off. The old ladies thank me for my help and I help them on to the bus.

At the Tavern the band is playing heavy metal and they're really loud so I'm having to get quite close to the people I'm talking to so they can hear me. It's really busy too and there's not enough space to swing a cat. Feels quite intimate and cosy. Just how I like it.

Onto the club. I'm at the bar, checking out the guy next to me, he's got a nice package, and a nice smile. Looks like he works out too. Bulges everywhere. My heart is all a flutter. I give him the come on, flirt like mad, touching him seductively, then put my arms round his waist, puckering up. He ain't having any of it though. His loss! Looks like his wife's clocked me, so I make a fast exit.

There's a fight going on outside, bouncers trying to break things up. I'm jostled in and out of the crowd trying to see what's going on, but too many people are doing the same thing and getting in my way. Things are getting heated, people are losing their cool, paying no notice to anyone else. Time to go home.

The cop shop are outside my house. Luckily nowt to do with my place. Looks like there's been a break in next door. Robbers made a right mess of the place. Neighbours better get their door fixed, you never know who might try it next.

Ambulance turns up, they're inside for quite a while before they bring the old lady out, she don't look so good. Such as shame, she was a gem!

Molecular Chemistry

In my experience it is not usual to realise a passion for a crush in a chemistry lecture. Ten minutes from now my view on stereo-chemistry will change very much for the better.

We are filing into the room, one hundred students of the fundamentals of life who really want to simply be students of, well, life. In a kind of Brownian motion we jostle to our seats.

Molecular chemistry. Today a thrilling study of left-molecules and right-molecules. Like identical twins who embrace nurture not nature. Chiral counterparts made of the same brilliant stuff.

Our professor knows how to engage an audience of partially interested youth. He has about a hundred years of experience and two hundred years of patience and one hour of opportunity.

He has placed a mirror in the middle of the long wooden bench at the front of the lecture theatre. I cannot see myself in this mirror. I can only see a section of the audience.

And you.

Five minutes from now I will not even see anyone else in the room. Five minutes from now I will barely see the mirror. Five minutes from now the chemistry will be intensely consuming.

Looking away and around I cannot see you. Looking back you are there. Chiral you looking...nearly at me. It is a new view. An angle of reflection for a new angle on attraction.

Five, four, three, two, one...chiral you looks at me and my heart skips...one, two, three, four, five. It seems like I have fallen in to your orbit and now we are a chemical reaction.

Real me looks at chiral you and real you looks at chiral me. I cannot decide if it is left-me and right-you or left-you and right-me. It feels right. Right-you and right-me then.

Our optical isomers explore our newly energetic bond. We are a molecule that has no idea what it is for. Except it is clearly for the duration as everything around sublimes into nothing.

Communicating in sign language of raised eyebrows, signals and mouthed words in twenty minutes we will have arranged the time, the place, the activity. We are enamoured enantiomers.

In twenty five minutes our chiral counterparts will be gone. In twenty five minutes left-me and left-you will replay the reaction. For twenty five minutes chemistry is all that matters.

For one hour our professor talks chemistry. For one hour you and I ignore his words. We are the real chiral exploration of chemical attraction. High on energy, the mirror reflecting our light.

At the end of the lecture we stay where we are, our colleagues filtering out past us until we are alone. And finally left-me and left-you turn to see each other and complete the bond.

In thirty days our bond will break in an explosion of light. I still see chiral me as we clearly go hand-in-hand. But chiral you, well, we left each other's right in that one hour chemistry class.

LGB Transphobia

1. The Recent Past.

Back in the mid 1980s I was secretary of a gay men's social group. As well as regular social events we also invited guest speakers covering a wide range of topics. I remember one meeting where we had invited two trans people to talk to us about their lives and experiences. Using the terminology of the time, one of them was a transvestite and one a transsexual who'd had surgery to complete her transition. During their informative talk and the discussion that followed, they spoke about the differences between their two identities as well as making it clear they could only speak for themselves and not for other trans people.

After the meeting, as usual, we went to a nearby pub where, though not a gay venue, we had always been made to feel welcome, and the two speakers came with us. As soon as we walked in we could feel the icy atmosphere and though we were served the manager later made it clear to me that trans people were not welcome in his pub.

Fast forward a few years to the 1990s when I was my UNISON branch Lesbian & Gay Equality Officer. A trans woman who had been subjected to harassment was transferred to the section where I was union rep. My knowledge of trans issues was restricted to that meeting in the previous decade so she introduced me to some of her trans friends and they explained in some detail the issues they faced, including discrimination and prejudice from both heterosexual and gay communities. I had lots of questions and, in retrospect, this diverse group of people was incredibly patient with me. I did what I could as a union rep to support her, but in reality she and her friends did far more for me in helping me to understand transgender lives and issues.

At that time within lesbian and gay circles there was a lot of antagonism aimed at bisexuals, including in the UNISON national Lesbian & Gay Group, which for years refused to allow those who identified as bisexual from attending its meetings. Also many lesbian and gay activists at the time wanted nothing to do with trans people. Some lesbians argued that trans women were enemies of feminism because they apparently reinforced gender stereotypes. Some gay men wanted to distance themselves from what they viewed as effeminate men. Trans men were largely invisible. Those of us who argued that the UNISON Lesbian & Gay Group should be more inclusive were often treated with suspicion.

2. The Rainbow Umbrella

Times have moved on, discrimination on the basis of sexuality is now illegal and we are all familiar with the more inclusive LGBT+ abbreviation. Concepts such as cis-gendered, non-binary and a host of different ways of naming our multiple identities are becoming more familiar within our communities, and even within straight society. In most parts of the country there are LGBT+ groups which bring us all together under our rainbow umbrella; we socialise, campaign and for those of us with faith worship together.

Of course we still organise separately, and there is nothing wrong with that. Lesbians, gay men, bisexual men and women, transgender men and women and non-binary people face different issues and problems, and within those broad groups of people there are differences based on social class, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, specific interests and other parameters. In the main, such separate organisation is healthy and allows all of us to maximise our experiences. But when such separate organisation is used to oppress or discriminate against others in the rainbow, it must be challenged. It seems to me that the new LGB Alliance is one such group.

3. LGB Alliance Claims.

Let's begin by looking at some of the aims and claims made by the LGB Alliance. On its website <https://lgballiance.org.uk> it states:

"We believe that biological sex is observed at birth and not assigned. In our view, current gender ideologies are pseudo-scientific and present a threat to people whose sexual orientation is towards the same sex, or to both sexes. In addition, we believe that these ideologies are confusing and dangerous to children."

Its website makes it clear that "current gender ideologies" means those supporting the rights of trans people. For example, under 'Aims' it has the following:

"To protect children and young people from being taught unscientific gender doctrines, particularly the idea that they may have been born in the wrong body, which may lead to life-changing and potentially harmful medical procedures."

Although this statement doesn't directly mention transgender, its rejection of the idea of being born in the wrong body, and calling such an idea unscientific, can only refer to trans people. This is made explicit in the statement demanding "a seat at the table" because:

"At present those consulting on LGBT concerns are pro the trans lobby and its agenda of rolling out self-ID."

On Twitter the group goes further, providing links to various other anti-trans groups and making statements such as:

"'Gender identity' is presented as liberating but it's just a new and distinctly 21st Century form of homophobia laced with misogyny."

Little or no evidence is provided to back up any of these statements. However, rather than just dismissing the claims we need to address them. After all, these are lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, aren't they? And don't lots of feminists oppose the extension of trans rights?

Let's begin with the claim that "gender ideologies present a threat to people whose sexual orientation is towards the same sex or to both sexes".

At no time on the website are we told what makes trans and non-binary people a "threat" to lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. Those of us who are lesbian, gay or bisexual have long faced and continue to face threats from queer bashers, from homophobic employers and service providers and in some countries where homosexuality is still illegal from the state. There are still plenty of dinosaurs who can make us at best uncomfortable and at worst unsafe. Organisations such as the Equality Network, LGBT Youth Scotland, TIE and groups representing refugees, asylum seekers, older people and disabled people, among others, have

shown just how many threats are still out there.

However, the idea that a gay man or a lesbian or a bisexual person would be at risk from a trans or non-binary person because of their gender identity, thus putting them on the same plane as a queer basher or a homophobic boss is unreasoning prejudice at its most pernicious. Indeed, trans and non-binary people daily face prejudice, discrimination and threats of violence.

Of course, just as being gay or lesbian or bisexual doesn't make you a nice person, just as there are plenty of LGB people who are criminals or racists or engage in anti-social behaviour, so there will be trans people who are the same (hence the importance of trans criminals being sent to prisons that accord with their gender identity). However it is not their gender identity that makes them criminals or leads to them engaging in anti-social behaviour. Yet the Alliance seems to be claiming it is their gender identity which is the threat.

4. Biological Reductionism

The LGB Alliance claims that "biological sex is observed at birth and not assigned" and that "current gender ideologies are pseudo-scientific" are potentially more serious and need to be examined more closely.

In part the claim that "biological sex is observed at birth" is the straw man approach to debate. That is, stating something that most people would agree on but presenting it as something on which people disagree. In most cases, biological sex is clear at birth and for most of us – the cis-gendered majority – there will be no or little conflict between our biological sex and our gender identity. In my case, I was born with male bits, I am happy to live as a cis-gendered man and I have no desire to live as anything other than a gay man. But this is not the case for a minority of people.

According to the website *Real Clear Science* self-reported transgender identity ranges from 0.5 to 1.3% (https://www.realclearscience.com/blog/2018/10/08/navigating_the_controversial_science_on_transgender.html).

The source for these figures is a piece of research titled *Epidemiology of Gender Dysphoria and Transgender Identity* published in the peer reviewed journal *Sexual Health* in 2017. So we are clearly talking about a tiny minority of people, possibly as low as 1 in 200 people. For most of us our biological sex and our gender are in alignment with each other.

However, to go from this to claim that theories about gender identity are "pseudo-science", in other words fake science, is a massive step which the Alliance and others make without providing any evidence. It is, in reality, an example of what philosophers have called Reductionism, that is attempting to explain phenomena by reference to a single cause. The *Oxford Reference Dictionary* takes its definition of Biological Reductionism from *A Dictionary of Sociology* (John Scott & Gordon Marshall, Oxford University Press, 2015):

"A theoretical approach that aims to explain all social and cultural phenomena in biological terms, denying them any causal autonomy."

Often the problem with Reductionism isn't the starting point, but conclusions drawn from it. An example might help make this clear. Most people, including the vast majority of reputable scientists, accept the basic findings of Darwin and evolutionary biology that life on earth evolved from single cell organisms to more complex life, including homo sapiens, and that part of this process is what is called 'survival of the fittest'. A few isolated creationist sects apart, most religious leaders and people of faith also broadly accept this

explanation of our origins, seeing religious texts such as the creation story in the *Bible* as being mythical or metaphorical. So far, so good.

However, there are those who have taken this scientific explanation, argued that it explains everything and that any theories that question its universal application are irrational. Notable examples of this Reductionism include Eugenics, which argues that the human race can be improved by selective breeding to weed out weaknesses and strengthen 'desirable' hereditary traits and was a major feature of Nazi philosophy (and we all know where that led); Social Darwinism, which argues that individuals, groups and whole societies are subject to the same Darwinian laws as plants and animals; and Sociobiology, which argues that social behaviour is a product of evolution and can be explained by recourse to 'survival of the fittest'. What all these theories have in common is the belief that all human activity and existence can be reduced to the level of genes and atoms, in the process reducing the human to little more than a machine that does things it is programmed to do.

Sociobiology, for example, has attempted to fit the persistence of homosexuality into its belief that survival of the fittest is at the root of social behaviour. It has done so by arguing that homosexuality serves two functions: firstly, it is one of nature's ways of getting rid of undesirable hereditary elements from the gene pool by making it less likely that such people will breed; and secondly, that homosexuals by being less likely to breed provide an important pool of people who can care for those who do breed. In other words we are either undesirable or are destined to be social workers, nurses, midwives and carers.

Such explanations aren't science, they are homophobia masking as science and ideological explanations that claim to be based on science. In some ways they remind me of the canine narrator in Franz Kafka's short story *Investigations of a Dog* who, observing that water encourages the growth of plants that provide food but, with his nose to the ground, fails to observe rain and concludes it is dog urine that is responsible for the food.

Those who use the fact of biological sex as observed at birth as a stick to beat trans and non-binary people with are making a similar unjustified, unscientific and ideological jump.

This Biological Reductionism also often attempts to find out what causes homosexuality, and all such attempts have failed, partly because of the tunnel vision that sees biology as the sole valid source of facts about humanity. Similar attempts to try and find what causes a small minority of people to be trans and non-binary are, I would suggest, also doomed. As with homosexuality, theories about what causes some people to be trans or non-binary have been of the "nature or nurture" type. Some have suggested that the brains of trans people are different from those who are cis, for example the European Society of Endocrinology published research in 2018 claiming that "transgender brains are more like their desired gender from an early age" (<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/05/180524112351.htm>). Others have argued that gender, and therefore transgender, is a social construct.

Often, when scientists look for a cause, it will be part of an attempt to cure something, as in 'what causes cancer' or 'what causes road accidents'. After all, when was the last time you read about people trying to find out what 'causes' heterosexuality or what 'causes' most people to be cis-gendered? Neither sexuality nor gender identity are things in need of a cure.

I suspect there are many potential causes that help determine someone's sexuality or gender identity, and

these may well vary from person to person and culture to culture. Looking for a single cause of anything is inevitably Reductionist.

In reality, it shouldn't matter what causes most people to be heterosexual and a minority of us gay or bisexual; likewise it shouldn't matter why most people are cis and a minority are trans or non-binary. What matters in both cases is ensuring that people – gay, bi or straight; cis, trans or non-binary – are able to live their lives to the full without threats or discrimination.

That is why I believe we should support the proposed introduction by the Scottish government of a Gender Recognition Act and why we should call for more medical and social support for trans people in order to help them live their lives in the gender they recognise themselves as being.

5. Trans and Non-binary People in History and Culture.

The categories we used in the 20th century and continue to use and have expanded in the 21st century can't be uncritically applied to all historical epochs or all cultures. Human beings are social animals who live within particular cultures that can change, and as such the way we interact with the world and each other, both individually and collectively, will be different depending on the historical and cultural worlds we find ourselves in and which earlier generations helped create. So using words like 'gay' in reference to Ancient Greece or applying words like 'trans' to some Native American cultures are problematic.

Having said that, we can see phenomena in other epochs or cultures that show some interesting relationships between sexuality, gender and societal norms. Space precludes more than a superficial examination of some of these.

In some Native American cultures there are those who used to be called Berdache, but who are now generally called Two Spirit people. They are people who were born male but took on the roles of women, and they often married men. In modern language we could refer to them as being both trans and gay, but that would be to put 20th and 21st centuries Western ideas onto a very different culture. Most of these societies were, unlike our own, matriarchal, that is lineage was through the female line, and Two Spirit people were often of high status (unlike the experience of LGBT people in our society), sometimes even seen as having shamanistic or supernatural powers.

In the Indian sub-continent there have existed for as long as there are records a group of people generally referred to as Hijra, a Hindustani word that can't be easily translated into English. The word Hijra includes a wide range of different people: those born male but who identify as women, those born inter-sex, those who consider themselves to be non-binary (to use a 21st century word), those who consider themselves to be a third gender. Some Hijra might also be considered in Western terms to be gay. Others reject sex and sexuality altogether. Hijras often live in their own communities, sometimes with a leader called a guru, and many, but by no means all, earn a living from prostitution. In Indian society, Hijras form their own caste. Hindu Hijra trace their origins to the gods.

During the centuries that Britain occupied the sub-continent, Hijras were criminalised and attempts were made to eradicate them. Although of low status and often subjected to violence, they now have a degree of state protection. In Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan they are recognised in law as a third gender, and in India and Nepal can have their gender stated on passports and other official documents.

I could provide many other examples including ones from literature, music and art, but the ones I have

briefly discussed suggest that biology and gender are not necessarily the same thing. As social animals we are so much more than our biology and there is no reason why we should allow ourselves to be defined by biology, whether as lesbians or gay men or bisexuals or trans or non-binary people.

6. Freedom of Expression.

I have on occasions been criticised by some activists for my defence of free speech. There are those who conflate supporting the right of people to express their opinions with actually supporting those opinions. I suspect this conflation is made worse by the way social media works, particularly sites like Twitter where there are restrictions on the number of characters in a post. I defend the right of the Alliance and its supporters to argue their case, even though I disagree strongly and fundamentally with their aims. Freedom of expression is an essential component of any society that calls itself civilised, and the more we disagree with what someone says, the more important it is to defend their right to say it.

There are also pragmatic reasons for supporting freedom of expression. The moment we deny an individual or a group the right to express themselves publicly, they are then able to claim the moral high ground. Also, unless we allow them to express their views publicly, we are unable to challenge them, and we lose the opportunity to influence those who listen to or read the debates and arguments.

However, there are limits on free speech. If a visitor to my home expressed deeply racist views, I would ask them to leave. The law recognises such limits. The libel and slander laws for example, and perhaps more controversially the laws restricting discussion on matters relating to state security. There are also quite rightly laws against incitement to violence. Such things are abuses of freedom of expression.

Much as I disagree with everything the LGB Alliance stands for, I defend the group's right to exist and meet and their right to express verbally and in writing their views, whether that be online or in print or from the public stage or in the streets. I also defend their right to enter LGBT+ public spaces, like pubs, clubs, cafés and bookshops providing they don't abuse others.

What about the recent incident in the Glasgow LGBT+ venue, the Polo Lounge? For those who don't know what happened, a young woman who describes herself as bisexual went into the Polo Lounge wearing a t-shirt containing the words 'LGB Alliance'. After some trans people enjoying an evening there complained to the management, she was asked to either remove the shirt or put it on inside out so the words weren't visible. When she refused to do so, she was asked to leave.

On the one hand, venues such as the Polo Lounge should be safe places for all LGBT+ people, places where we can be ourselves without others criticising us for our sexuality or gender identity. If a gay man in such a venue started a misogynist rant about lesbians or wore a t-shirt from a group denying the validity of the lesbian experience, the venue would be justified in asking him to leave. In that sense, as the young woman was wearing a t-shirt from a group that campaigns against trans rights, asking her to leave was justified.

However, just because a course of action is justified doesn't necessarily mean it is the best approach.

Both the LGB Alliance and newspapers such as *The Sun* made much of this incident, claiming the venue was discriminating against bisexual women and stating their action may have been illegal under equality legislation. Given its unsavoury history, I am always wary when *The Sun* offers its support to any group of

people. The Sun has never been a friend of LGBT+ people and in the past has campaigned against equal age of consent, employment protection, the repeal of Section 28 and much more. And there is no evidence that she was asked to leave because she was a bisexual woman, indeed the staff at the venue may not have known she was bisexual.

In my view, neither the homophobic nature of *The Sun* nor my rejection of her claim to have been discriminated against are relevant. What is relevant is that by her ejection from the Polo Lounge, the LGB Alliance managed to get a lot of publicity, more people visiting their social media sites and probably gaining support they wouldn't otherwise have got. Indeed, being ejected may have been what the Alliance wanted all along.

All of us who support trans rights and who support a change in the law have been playing catch-up ever since. Despite the Polo Lounge being justified in asking her to leave, I believe it was, for pragmatic reasons, the wrong course of action.

7. Conclusion

The *Merrian-Webster Dictionary* defines transphobia as the "irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against transgender people."

The *Wikipedia* entry on transphobia adds: "Transphobia can include fear, aversion, hatred, violence, anger, or discomfort felt or expressed towards people who do not conform to society's gender expectations."

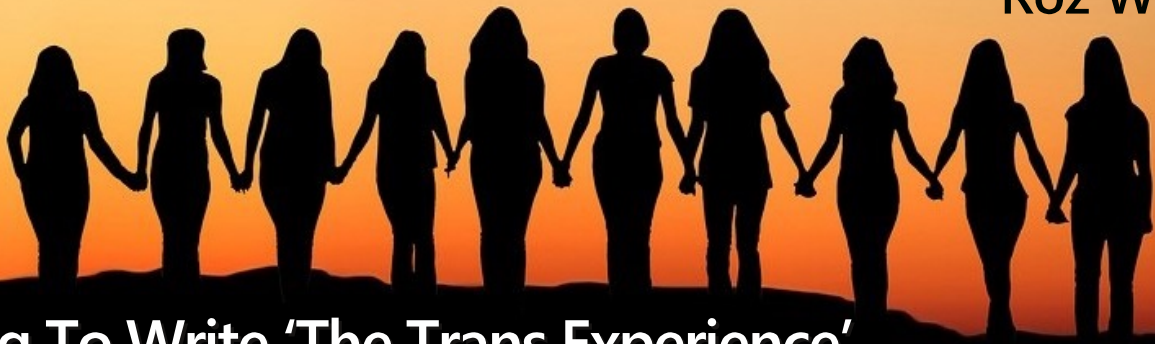
In *Whipping Girl* (Seal Press, 2007) biologist and trans activist Julia Serano writes that transphobia has its roots in sexism. Jody Norton argues that it is an extension of both homophobia and misogyny (*International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 1997).

When the LGB Alliance describes "current gender ideologies" as unscientific and dangerous, and when it includes the idea of being born in the wrong body in this designation, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the group is expressing transphobia, particularly when it criticises what it calls "the trans lobby".

The Alliance goes even further: it describes the campaign for trans rights, including support for the *Gender Recognition Act*, as "homophobia laced with misogyny". In doing this, it is rejecting the research and ideas of Serano, Norton and many others. It doesn't provide any evidence to show how trans rights are homophobic and misogynist.

There are many reasons why we talk about LGBT+ rights, rather than just gay rights or lesbian and gay rights. The abbreviation recognises both the differences and similarities in the experience of oppression by lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans women and men and non-binary people. Each part of the rainbow umbrella supports other parts: lesbians, for example, played a crucial role in HIV/AIDS campaigns in the 1980s and 90s, despite them as a group being at low risk; trans activists walked alongside lesbians and gay men at Stonewall; gay and bisexual men supported demands for equal pay for women; going even further back, lesbian and bisexual women stood with us gay and bisexual men when we demanded that our love should not be a crime.

What makes us strong and what has made so many of our campaigns successful is the way we have managed to work together and support each other while acknowledging our differences based on sexuality, gender and gender identity. Groups like the LGB Alliance, by challenging the rainbow umbrella and by making unsupported accusations (such as gender ideology being a threat to lesbians, gay men and bisexuals), are a threat to the rainbow umbrella that celebrates difference while maintaining unity of purpose.



Trying To Write 'The Trans Experience'

It is a truism, for me at least, that whenever I begin writing in a given genre – and so far there have been three – it is mainly because I want to read something in that genre and cannot find anything I consider suitable! When I began in historical fiction, for example, my feeling was that, as a re-enactor of the Viking Age, I wanted fiction that accurately reflected my own knowledge of the period (which is considerable, she says with uncharacteristic modesty). What I found was a plethora of novels featuring horned helmets, double-headed axes and a commute from the vastness of Russia to Vinland (modern Canada) that took barely a week! (As an aside, in the Real World, such a journey could have taken up to *five years* and, to my knowledge, it was never actually done.) You have to be immersed in the period to appreciate just how much such things grate! Similarly with my Steampunk adventures; the genre has grown, and also grown-up, a lot since my own first readings, but those early ones were truly awful – barely first-draft quality – some great ideas but severely lacking in even the basics of presentation or coherency.

So perhaps it ought not to have come as any great surprise to me when, on wanting to further understand what I was personally going through in those far-away days of questioning, resisting and hiding my femininity, I found only very limited amounts of beyond badly-written porn, where the trans element served as little more than a device by which the hetero-male main protagonist is 'drawn-in' to aspects of basic physical sex that he has never before even imagined, let alone tried. I found nothing that spoke to me of the trials, the heartache, the soul-searching that form part of so many transwomen's narratives, and I have no doubt it is similar for transmen as well. So I set out to produce something that spoke to me, and hopefully to others in a similar position, or range of positions.

And there is so much of it! How do you wrestle with so many often contradictory elements in the broader trans experience? How, for example, do you incorporate the probable collapse of a marriage with the occasional (and I know a few) survival of that institution? How do you include both the fact that many transwomen are now entering what could be described as Old Age while young teenagers (or even younger) are starting out on those first, uncertain steps into their own journeys of self-discovery? What about the dichotomy of those who are out, open and full-time with those who remain closeted and part-time? And how do you present all these options, choices and circumstances as being *equally valid for the people involved*? After all, being trans isn't a contest, nor is it a race. There is no common 'end point', no Final Goal or Destination that all transpeople are somehow aspiring towards. So it's a bit of a can of worms, really, and one that anybody at all opens at their peril. So many experiences, not just one. But that was actually the clue to getting something written that I needed. I couldn't just write one story; there was indeed too much to include, much of it contradictory, as already noted. So why not write *lots* of parallel, connected stories?

Thus was *The Sisterhood* series born. One day in 2013 I had the house to myself; I sat down and, rather to my surprise, wrote seven thousand words in that one single day. It was enough to establish my five main characters, to get an idea of what I was going to put them through in the course of what I thought would be one novel but even then suspected that there might be more than that! At this time there are six published full novels and four novellas, with another two novels completed and awaiting their turn for publication. The girls just keep on talking! So let's have a quick introduction...

Sarah is the New Girl, and it's quite revealing, I think, how many transgirls who read the books tell me that they see something of themselves in Sarah. She is where we all begin – hesitant, frightened, wondering where it all leads or ends and terrified of losing what they have because of it. The series begins with her first visit to The Sisterhood club, and thus allowed me to introduce the other main characters.

Sarah's first encounter is with Naomi, the founder and Mother Hen of the club. She serves as the Happy Part-Timer model, more of a drag queen than anything else, but also with the experience and compassion to have made it her mission to try and find as many local girls as she can, and give them the safe space that so many lack in the rest of their lives, even out here in the Real World.

Naomi in turn introduces Sarah to Jo. Jo is the stable, finished product, post-op for some years at the time of the stories, transitioned successfully at work – although there are wrinkles there, which allow the provision of something akin to a villain in the book – and estranged from her family. But the sudden slipping into a coma of her former wife draws her back into their orbit, which is a device in this case for charting the more extreme forms of religious bigotry against the very concept of being transgendered, with which Jo has to try and deal alongside everything else. She is the swan, if you like – calm and serene on the surface whilst paddling like fury out of sight!

On that first evening, Jo is sharing a table with Phoebe and Cathy; Phoebe is also post-op, although only just a year so, and struggling. Following Phoebe, we explore the unexpected consequences of coming out – she has lost her family, her job, and thus her income. Unknown to her, a glitch in her social security applications has meant that she is running out of money, her rent has not been paid, and The System has failed to keep up with her new status. She has withdrawn and is in danger of becoming a recluse; it is Sarah's appearance within her restricted social circle that allows Phoebe to undergo something of an Epiphany, and begin to truly blossom into a quite remarkable woman.

Cathy begins the stories as a part-timer, an occasional dresser with a previous diagnosis of gender dysphoria and who yearns desperately for more. Through her eyes we experience the hostility of a family and partner who simply doesn't *want* to understand, or even try to understand, who sees it all as merely trivial, optional, deviant, perverted and somehow disgusting, in the manner we are still sometimes presented in the tabloids. As with Sarah, a good many readers have identified with Cathy, especially with elements such as her family's hostility and that awful limbo of trying to deny who we really are simply to try and please – or placate – those with whom we have built a life, whatever the reasons for doing so.

The books have been very well-received, I am happy to report – and by cis-hetero readers as well as trans or other LGBT-identifying people. I will never get rich on doing this – my royalties just about buy me a bottle of plonk most months – but it is very rewarding in its own way to hear that people are finding something of relevance to their own lives in my scribblings. After all, that's why I began writing the things in the first place...

As readers might have surmised, Roz is the author of The Sisterhood series of novels, available from Amazon. She also writes Victoriana Steampunk and, under the pseudonym of H.A. Douglas, is the author of half-a-dozen historical novels set in the Viking Age of Wirral and Orkney most of which are currently listed on Lulu.

Roz's books can be purchased through Amazon at www.amazon.co.uk/Roz-White/e/B00W1L8QKW/ and through LuLu at www.lulu.com/shop/search.ep?contributorId=613943 H. A. Douglas's books can also be found on Lulu at www.lulu.com/shop/search.ep?contributorId=314737



A Top Surgery Diary

The following diary reflects my own experience at North General Hospital which was largely a positive one and I'm very grateful to the members of the surgical team. There are a few negatives in the following narrative of what happened to me, none of which are meant as criticism of the hospital staff – it's simply the way things were. I feel very lucky to have had my operation on the NHS and in particular with the experienced Manchester team.

Timeline:

June 2016 – First appointment with Dr McKenna at Inverness Gender Identity Clinic

November 2016 – Started testosterone

August 2017 – Saw a psychologist at Glasgow's Sandyford Centre to agree to top surgery

May 2018 – First appointment at Manchester with Miss Williams. Told to expect 6-8 months wait for surgery due to her going on maternity leave in the summer and Miss Dabritz taking on all patients while training up a third surgeon Dr Ntanos.

June 2018 – Pre-op tests at Manchester and signed consent forms

5th March 2019 – Top surgery operation

December 2019 – Standard post-op review appointment

January 2019

Getting overwhelmed by anxiety about how to cope with the letter which might drop through the letterbox at any moment and turn my world upside down. Reading recent comments in the Trans Masculine Scotland Facebook group, it seems as though I'm most likely to get a letter asking me to phone the Manchester pre-op team to go through a questionnaire and possibly get my GP to repeat some of the pre-op tests as it's been well over 6 months since my appointment last June. The anxiety is quite crippling and I feel I'm living in fear – fear of my own inability to cope with whatever is about to happen. Towards the end of the month, I decide to face up to my fears and email the surgeons' secretary to ask for an idea of timescales. The secretary can't tell me anything concrete but says that things will speed up after Miss Williams returns to work in early March. I take this as a sign that nothing is imminent and decide to switch off from worrying further until then.

Wednesday 20th February 2019

I get home after a visit to the osteopath and find a missed call from Manchester with a message from a nurse in the pre-op department. It's lunchtime when I phone back and they are closed. When I ring again she asks if I would like to have surgery on 5th March. This gives me just 13 days notice but I decide to accept. I feel a lot calmer than I expected. I guess my brain has gone into organisation mode. There are lots of practical and logistic things I now need to do. Part of me is grateful that it seems just about long enough to get everything done and not too long to agonise in anxiety, worrying about how I will cope.

I'd already written a list of things that I'd need to do as soon as I got a date and this was really useful to check through. The immediate points of action had to be booking the accommodation and flights there and back. I've been stockpiling everything from tins and cereals to rice and toilet paper as I don't have a car and don't want to be too reliant on other people having to take me shopping, even though I've had several offers of help.

Counting Down to Surgery...

I feel incredibly buoyed up by everyone's enthusiasm. So many people are genuinely excited for me and wishing me well. I really feel like I'm riding the crest of a wave of positivity. Strangely, virtually all the anxiety seems to have dissipated. I feel much more secure. I know that I'm doing the right thing for me (it's a decision I took a couple of years ago). I know I am fulfilling my destiny. I know I have the support of people around me, in particular Samuel, who is coming with me, and his mum who has offered to let me stay at her flat afterwards. I know I am not alone – it seems to be a team effort now.

I meet up with Samuel again and he talks through everything that happened to him at the hospital with his own surgery last year. This is extremely helpful. Knowledge is power! I also have confidence in the surgeons and staff – they all know what they are doing and they do it every day and they have a good reputation from what I can gather of other guys' experiences on Facebook. I have no real concerns about any aspect of the sequence of events. I'm sure it will be plain sailing. I keep telling myself that all I have to do is: get to the hospital on time, be myself and keep breathing. That's all I have to do.

Monday 4th March

A friend takes Samuel and me to the airport. It's the first time I have flown commercially since the early 1990s so I'm a bit worried about not knowing the post-9/11 security procedures, but Sam has done this before, so all I have to do is follow his lead.

Surprisingly I still don't feel as anxious as I expected. I think it's because I firmly believe I'm doing the right thing and that I will be ok. Having Sam with me is invaluable as I know I'm not alone. It's making a huge difference though it still feels somewhat unreal.

Tuesday 5th March

I have to report to the admissions unit in the hospital for 12 noon. Samuel has already explained what's likely to happen based on his own experience 12 months ago and that takes away a lot of my fear of the unknown. The receptionist asks me to confirm my next of kin details and I explain that Samuel would be the first person to contact rather than my sister who is 200 miles away. Initially we sit in a waiting room absolutely full of people who all seem to be there for different reasons ranging from scans to day-case surgeries. It is really noisy. I get called through by a nurse who says that the surgeon is ready to see me straight away. I had expected to go through the pre-op questionnaire with a nurse first (as this had happened to Samuel), but this was just down to staff availability and timings on the day.

So this is my first encounter with the legendary Ms Dabritz, who I've heard so much about. I suddenly found myself in a small room alone with her. We had a quick chat and she drew on my chest with the marker pen. We discussed the procedure I wanted for the nipples and I mentioned that I definitely wanted them to be smaller. At this point Miss Dabritz explained I would get a better result from the free nipple grafts technique instead of dermal flap which is what I had originally chosen. Miss Williams had offered both options when I saw her 9 months previously, but I hadn't realised at the time that having free nipple grafts was the only way to get smaller nipples (and mine were quite large).

I had to sign the consent forms (this seemed to be a different version to what I'd signed months earlier at the pre-op appointment). I think she said they were aiming to start operating at 1:30pm. Then the nurse came back and said the anaesthetist was ready to see me straight away, so he came in and we went through a whole questionnaire. He got me to stick my fingers in my mouth and tip my head back, so he could see how well they could intubate me I think.

Then the nurse came back and went through the whole health questionnaire on the computer. I think one of them weighed me on the scales (something to do with the amount of anaesthetic they give you?). The nurse said I was all done and they would take me to get undressed straight away.

Samuel had told me that he'd been called to see the nurse, then gone back to the waiting room before being called back to see the surgeon and then the anaesthetist – so this may vary depending on whether they are all ready simultaneously or not.

Samuel had been sitting in the waiting room with my bag, so I only got a few seconds to go back and say goodbye before being whisked off again. It was a bit of a whirlwind as they were more efficient with their timings than I had anticipated! I'm sure they would let a friend/partner/family member go through with you to the nurse/surgeon/anaesthetist if you wanted.

The nurse showed me the small changing area where there's a couple of cubicles and some seats. They gave me compression stockings to put on and I found them quite tight so it took a bit of time. They also gave me a gown and I think they said to put my own dressing gown on over the top. I left my boxers on and changed into my slippers. Only just managed to get all my clothes, coat and shoes fitted into my bag as I hadn't thought to leave my coat with Samuel because it was all so quick. Didn't have to wait long before I was walked down towards the theatre. Somebody must have taken my bag and labeled it as mine (but it might be worth putting on a luggage tag of your own just to be on the safe side). There was a small waiting area near the theatres and we weren't there long before it was time. I just took off my dressing gown and slippers, and lay on the trolley with the surgical gown fairly loose so they had easy access. The anaesthetist I'd seen earlier was a junior, and he was there with his boss and another nurse. They put some ECG electrodes on me (legs and back) and soon the cannula was in my hand and I was unconscious before I knew it! I estimate that was around 1:30-2pm...

The next thing I knew it was 6pm and I was waking up in Recovery. There were a couple of nurses (one was a trainee as the other lady was telling her what to do) and only one other patient. I'm pretty sure they mis-gendered me when talking between themselves (and I can understand why – just seeing a female body on trolley who's just had a double mastectomy) but I was feeling too flaky to say anything about it. The senior nurse said I'd tried to climb off the trolley and said something like "you're very strong" – maybe not understanding I'm on testosterone!. I felt really sick and very cold. They gave some anti-nausea drug through the IV cannula which was still in my hand and they wrapped me in blankets. I seem to remember he also told me that they had lost my ECG signal when I was on the table and therefore I had even more electrodes on me than usual.

About 6:30pm they felt I was ready to go onto the ward. This seemed a bit daunting as I had no idea where I was going. To avoid keeping him hanging about, I'd agreed with Sam that he would go back to the hotel and just ring the hospital in the evening to check it had gone ok. I assumed I would be too 'out of it' to really want any visitors in the evening.

Somebody took me down on the trolley to the ward. Visiting time had already started so I found it really noisy with four people visiting the guy at the next bed and they were totally oblivious to the fact that I just wanted some peace and quiet! Unfortunately nobody gave me the buzzer to ask for assistance, so I felt a bit trapped. I wasn't sure about how much I could move and get myself out of bed. I could see that the two drains were tubes with small plastic receptacles to collect the blood.

I had no idea where the toilets were – but didn't initially feel the need to go. As it was teatime one of the auxiliaries offered me something to eat and, a bit wary of having felt sick earlier and also having a bit of a sore throat from the tube, I opted for yoghurt and some fruit in jelly. I didn't feel hungry, but I was thirsty.

My bag appeared on the ward about an hour after I arrived from the op. I had deliberately packed it with a pouch at the top containing my reading glasses, phone, charger and headphones, as I assumed these would be the first things I wanted when I was sufficiently 'with it' and didn't want to have to delve into the bag to find things when I wasn't sure how mobile I would be. Nor did I want to have to stretch to reach anything.

I can't remember when I had to hand over my regular medication (whether it was with the nurse in the changing area or whether it was on the ward). Anyway, I had put my three boxes of tablets into a clear plastic bag and, at some stage, a nurse took them to the nurses' station on the ward – but then when I asked for my bedtime doses, nobody knew anything about it. (The next day the hospital pharmacist came and catalogued everything I'd got and then they put it in the locker next to my bed.)

The first few times I wanted the toilet I got a nurse to take me – but had to wait until one was passing as I still had no buzzer to summon assistance. Initially I was still hooked up to an IV drip so that, plus the drains, made it a botheration to carry everything.

I felt surprisingly little pain compared to what I was expecting, but was unsure about my range of mobility and how much to move about without doing any mischief.

Visiting went on until 8pm and it was around this time that a passing nurse spotted that my chest was swelling up and seemed concerned. She tried contacting Miss Dabritz but couldn't get hold of her so was obviously trying to call other doctors. It seemed to take ages and I couldn't get anyone's attention unless they were walking past.

Eventually Dr Ntanos came down to look at me. By that time I had already figured they were keen to operate again. Then an anaesthetist came to ask a bunch of questions (especially wary of what I had been eating after the first op – luckily not much). One of them got me to sign more consent forms. Then I seemed to wait a while and wasn't feeling too good, certainly a bit hot and bothered. Managed to get a nurse to take me to the toilet before a lady called Teresa from the surgical night team came down to fetch me. She wheeled me upstairs into a waiting area about 11pm.

Miss Dabritz came in very briefly and then went off to get scrubbed up. Got wheeled into the anaesthetic room with the anaesthetist and another nurse, plus Teresa, who were all trying hard to keep my spirits up (not that I was particularly bothered as I felt in safe hands). It seemed to take longer to knock me out this time but I came round in recovery about 1am and Teresa was with me. (They had explained that the night team stay with you from start to finish as there are fewer staff than during the day). She took me back down to the ward about 1:30am. By then I had cannulas in both hands, and they had replaced the right hand drain with what looked like a pint bottle, so it was tricky getting to the toilet.

They couldn't find my meds which meant I didn't get my Mirtazapine until 4am (usually I take it 2 hours before bedtime as it is a sedative form of anti-depressant). I was just about ready to doze off by 6am when they starting waking everybody up, so that meant no sleep.

Wednesday 6th March

When they were doing the handover between the night shift and day shift, around 7:30am, I overheard one of the senior nurses say that it was the worst night shift she'd ever worked (understaffed and so many patients having problems with pain, etc. and me needing more surgery). Miss Williams came round to see me in the morning – I think Miss Dabritz was having a lie in after operating on me late into the night!

I didn't bother with any breakfast as I didn't feel up to it, which meant that yet again I missed out on both of my anxiety meds that I should have been taking 3 times a day. I ended up having some real panicky feelings for most of the morning and afternoon (which may well have been withdrawal symptoms). I was boiling hot and kept using wet wipes on my face, then kept burning up even more and began to wonder if I was allergic to them. Tried to drink as much as I could. Felt quite nauseous and dizzy at times. At various points they said my sats were low and my BP was also low.

Sam came about 11:30am when visiting started and he helped me to the toilet but I felt quite faint when I got back. Didn't want much for lunch, just had some yoghurt, and he had brought some little fruit pots which were refreshing. I really wanted to sleep but couldn't. Somebody came to take bloods from me about 2pm. Not sure whether they thought I had an infection because I was complaining about being so hot or whether that was routine.

Sam stayed 'til about 3pm but left so I could try to rest. Late in the afternoon I felt strong enough and had the confidence to get myself to the toilet and back without asking for help. That was a relief because otherwise I felt at the mercy of catching some passing nurse to ask her to take me.

I could see there was another transman recovering from chest surgery who must have had his op on Tuesday morning, but he wasn't close enough for me to be able to talk to, and he got discharged after just the one night. I subsequently found him in the TMSA-UK Facebook group and was able to apologise for not speaking with him but he had realised I was not well.

I found it very noisy on the ward. From what I could gather it was Men's Urology and all the guys around me had catheters and/or stoma bags. Several were elderly and had bladder cancer. One poor guy was refusing treatment and just wanted to go home to die. Another guy's wife was arranging a hospice for him. I wasn't prepared for any of this, having just assumed it would be a general surgery ward. Also found it difficult to be lying there with obvious chest dressings and discovering that most of the guys around me had cancer. Their lives were ending and mine was just beginning.

At 5pm I had some baked potato, sitting out of the bed for the first time, and then I definitely started to feel better. That was my first proper food for 48 hours (aside from a light breakfast on Tuesday at 7am). I was determined to stay out of bed for as long as possible as my backside was getting very sore lying in the same position in bed. It got so bad it felt like a ridge had developed across my buttocks (pooling of blood?). I really needed to sleep through the night this time so I wanted to be really tired when I did get into bed, but the nurse doing the rounds with the medication cabinet didn't get to me until 10pm so I had to force myself to stay awake for that, and after that I couldn't settle.

At 1am I was still awake and a junior doctor came round to wake up one of the bladder cancer patients opposite me to change his drip to a different antibiotic. Then a nurse came to me and said they were putting me on antibiotics because I had an infection (I assume this was a result from the 2pm blood test!). By now I was well enough to get myself to the toilet and so managed that before she came back to hook up the drip. It was difficult enough with 2 cannulas and 2 tubes/drains (one of which was this pint bottle), so I didn't want to be trying to take a drip bag along as well! Anyway it only took an hour or so to run through my system and then I got unhooked. There weren't enough drip stands so she just hung it from the curtain rail round my bed. It was a busy night for them and there seemed to be no peace at all. I tried listening to my meditation app on my phone but still couldn't sleep and at 6am they started waking everybody up again.

Thursday 7th March

The surgical registrar from the team came and spoke with me in the morning, and agreed to discharge me later that day. After the first operation on Tuesday, I'd been automatically given an appointment letter to go to the breast clinic and have my drains removed on Thursday afternoon, but that got scrapped because of the second operation and the extra time needed for more blood to drain out.

I had only managed a limited wash in the sink in the bathroom at lunchtime as I was so worn out (I hadn't slept for 2 nights, had missed a lot of my meds, and not eaten properly). They gave me a couple of boxes of codeine tablets, but no paracetamol. One of the nurses found me a drawstring cloth bag to put the drains in.

It seemed to take ages to get all the paperwork together but eventually on Thursday afternoon, they said I could just go to the clinic any time on Friday and somebody would remove the drains. I wasn't discharged until about 3pm. Sam arranged a taxi back to the hotel and it was great to have a meal in the hotel restaurant (hiding my bag with the drains under the table!) and then sleep the night in a quiet room.

Friday 8th March

We got another taxi back to the hospital in the morning and went to Outpatients F (the clinic where I had the initial consultations). Unfortunately I think the trans clinic is only on Thursday afternoons so on the Friday morning it was full of women, which was very off putting. Frankly I felt like a freak with my drains in a bag, feeling in need of a proper wash and appearing male (hopefully) in a clinic full of women having mammograms.

One of the nurses took me into a room and Dr Ntanos (who is the third surgeon) checked me over and gave the go ahead to remove the drains. This was relatively easy, although one side was more sore than the other. I was so tired, I didn't really think to ask any questions. No one really gave much advice about what you could or couldn't do (so I had to remember what they had said at the original pre-op meeting with the breast nurses 9 months ago, and luckily Sam had been through it all before). They put a plaster over the two sites where the drains were and I was able to take those off 2 or 3 days later. They gave me a card with the nurses' phone numbers on and the appointment letter to come back in 2 weeks time to have the dressings removed, so it was good to know the date straight away to be able to make the arrangements for it.

We went back to the hotel on the bus, which was ok as I didn't have the drains in. It was nice to see a bit of the outside world continuing in its usual way. Was just feeling too tired to get into the shower, although physically it wouldn't have been a problem, but I managed to have a bit more of a wash in the sink at the hotel and dunked my head under to wash my hair. For some unknown reason, a few hours after the drains came out I suddenly developed a massive bruise that spread about 10 inches around my abdomen – seemed pretty obvious it was blood that hadn't come out through the drains but then with gravity had decided to 'go south'. It didn't hurt. Samuel said we should ring the breast care nurses but it was gone 5pm and there was just an answerphone. I was determined to be on the plane home in the morning so didn't want any fuss!

Saturday 9th March

We had a taxi to the airport (there's a firm that does it for a fixed price of around £25) and when we checked into the Loganair desk I asked if I could get a wheelchair. Sam recommended this and he was right. It worked out well and the guy who took us bypassed a lot of the queues for security. I couldn't have stood up for that long in a queue in a busy noisy airport, so I'm really glad we took that option. The security guard decided to swab me for drugs/explosives and asked me to stand up and be frisked – he asked first of all if it hurt anywhere – and I just said I'd had chest surgery 2 days ago.

Everything had been further out of my comfort zone than I had expected. I was so glad to see land when the plane turned into Inverness airport that I nearly cried at being back on home territory! Then I spent 4 or 5 days recuperating at Sam's mum's flat which was ideal for me and better than going straight home where I would have been alone. I'm very grateful to Sam and his mum for looking after me so well as I couldn't have done it without them.

Thursday 21st March - Dressings Removal

I actually felt well enough to make the journey by myself and that worked out fine. I travelled very light with change of underwear and toiletries in a drawstring bag over my back. I flew down and managed to walk from the terminal to the airport train station easily enough, then it was only a short walk from Piccadilly station to the Premier Inn around the corner. (I had decided to get the train back to Inverness.)

I was seen by Dr Ntanos again in Outpatients F, but was disappointed I never got a chance to see Miss Dabritz and ask exactly what she'd done in the second operation. He removed the main incision dressings quite easily then looked at the nipples which were very scabby and then the nurse cleaned things up and re-dressed the nipples and gave me a few of the dressings so I could do it myself at home every few days. I was in and out in 10-15 minutes.

Dr Ntanos said I could start massaging the bio oil into the incisions in another couple of weeks once they were dry with no scabs on. It surprisingly didn't take long for the incisions to be scab free. The stitches are internal so the incisions themselves are very tidy. Ultimately it took about 8-10 weeks for the scabs to completely come off the nipples but I didn't bother with the dressings for very long (as I was generally wearing a vest so they weren't really likely to get caught in clothing).

Review Appointment

Before I left the clinic, and after having the dressings removed, they gave me the appointment letter for the 6 month review in September – but then sent me a new appointment a few months later postponing it (possibly because Miss Dabritz went on long term leave due to a bereavement). Then they cancelled the October appointment too, so eventually I was seen on 5th December by Dr Ntanos for the review. I asked him about options for revisions on the nipples as they haven't turned out that great – the size/shape are uneven and the middle bit is missing. He needed to ask Miss Williams about this, so (as of March 2020) I'm waiting to hear what they propose to do.

Tips

Write a list of what actions you need to take as soon as you get the date for your op (booking travel & accommodation, list of people to tell, shopping, changing the bed clothes so that's ready)

Don't shave your chest beforehand – they will do it on the operating table if they want to (don't think they did mine). I would recommend you trim (with scissors not shaver) the hair under your armpits – it will save some of it possibly getting stuck underneath when they tape down the dressings.

Pack very lightly for the hospital – change of underwear, toiletries bag with wet wipes and roll on deodorant, eye cover for sleeping, sucky sweets for a sore throat after intubation, phone/tablet plus headphones and longer charging cable so it can stay plugged in without you having to reach too far. I travelled down with some button up shirts and a zip up top. Jogging bottoms were also easier than dealing with trousers with buttons/belt, etc. It's better to have shoes that you can just slip on without having to bend and tie laces. I took a button-up pyjama top (but didn't need it in hospital as they kept the gown on me).

Most people are discharged after one night in hospital and then you return to the clinic the following day to have the drains removed. So you might need a bag to put your drains in when travelling to/from (they managed to find one for me, but not sure if they are always available).

I would recommend taking two sets of medication with you if you take anything on a daily basis, and keep one small stash with you just in case. The drugs round on the ward took ages – especially at night. I think they came round 4 times a day. One nurse dispenses to patients in the beds down one side of the ward and another nurse does the other side. I always seemed to be on the slower side and of course they keep getting distracted by other things happening. Sometimes they gave out codeine and sometimes it was just paracetamol. I realised it was better to say yes and keep it for later, even if I didn't want it at that particular moment. I was in for 2 nights because it was 2 operations and it was gone 10pm by the time the drugs round got as far as me on the second night (and I wished I'd accepted the 6pm round of pain killers).

I had to wear their compression stockings for 2 weeks afterwards (that may have been extended because of the haematoma I had).

Definitely worth taking ear plugs and/or headphones if you don't like noise. It seemed to be constant, even at night – the ward sister would quite happily shout all the way down the ward to another nurse at 3am! Then they start waking everyone up from 6am. By around 7:30am they are starting to prepare the handover to the day shift so there's really no peace.

Top Surgery Reflections

Now I'm one year post-op I can reflect on the difference top surgery has made to my life. I didn't wake up in hospital and think "woo-hoo" I've now got a flat chest and life is fantastic. I had expected to feel this amazing sense of liberation like I was free at last – but in reality, I felt nauseous and very cold from the effects of the anaesthetic. Then I felt a bit lost on the ward as I was by myself and didn't even know where the toilets were. It wasn't long before my chest started swelling with a haematoma so I was rushed back to theatre late at night. Consequently, with 2 general anaesthetics, not much food or liquid and having missed out on the regular medications I was taking 3 times a day for anxiety, I was definitely feeling somewhat worse for wear.

I found it surprisingly hard to re-connect my brain with my body. My brain knew I'd been through 2 surgeries and my body was recovering, but I felt a bit unsure what parts of me felt ok and how to adapt to having two drains and a drip. Initially I was a bit uncertain of how much range of movement I had and how far it was safe to move without doing myself any mischief. Actually the pain wasn't as bad as I had expected. Gradually I started to gauge what movements would provoke discomfort and sense the boundaries of my range of mobility as well as my threshold of pain. There was also an unexpected element of needing to reclaim ownership of my body – partly because it had changed, and partly because I knew surgeons/nurses had been doing things to it while I was unconscious (even though I had consented). In fact when I finally got back to the hotel, I felt the need to give my body a complete check over, perhaps for reassurance that all was as it should be.

I hadn't been prepared for 'life on the ward' where many of the men around me were facing terminal illnesses. This made me hesitant about disclosing too much of my surgical situation to the chap in the next bed who had already had three types of cancer. I found the noise and general busy-ness of the ward very tiring and was extremely relieved to get back to the Premier Inn after my 2 nights in hospital and two operations. It helped to use my headphones for music and my meditation app as much as possible, but I still didn't really relax or switch off that much when I was on the ward. All this made for a somewhat traumatic 48 hours in hospital where I felt very much out of my comfort zone and an extremely long way from home.

Initially I didn't really want to touch the dressings too much and it did feel somewhat alien. After 2 weeks when the dressings were removed, at last I could see my new chest and start the lengthy process of accepting it was mine. I felt I had to see it with my own eyes in order to 'own it'.

For a long time prior to surgery my brain had been blanking out what my chest actually looked like. It was a sort of self-imposed Bermuda Triangle. I had become very adept at believing my chest was already flat. I think this may have contributed to the strange feeling I had for several weeks after surgery that in fact nothing had changed and this became somewhat dispiriting.

In the fortnight leading up to surgery, there were lots of practical things to get ready, and a very infectious positivity of friends who were all excited for me. I felt incredibly well supported and I also knew deep down that I had made the right decision for me to go ahead. I felt I was riding on the crest of a wave. In the immediate week or two after surgery, I was just getting from day to day going with the flow of recovery. I was glad to get the dressings removed after 2 weeks as it was then much easier to get showered, but not long afterwards I felt a bit 'underwhelmed'. I hadn't experienced the instant liberation I had expected.

It can be hard to accept change, even when it's something that we have wanted for a long time. It takes time to come to terms with the 'new normal' even when it is a wish come true. It took quite a while before I really felt I owned my new chest. Having said that, it never felt odd as such, and I think that's because it felt just the way it should always have been.

I also came to realise that I was feeling a little lost after waiting such a long time for this one thing. Perhaps I'd put my life on hold more than I'd realised. Now there was nothing holding me back from carrying on with the rest of my life, I was unsure, even slightly fearful, of what direction I was meant to take next. Thankfully that dip didn't last too long, but it made me reflect on what I wanted to do with my life from that point onwards.

Fortunately, I feel that I recovered from surgery better than I had expected (I guess we are always prone to expect the worst and things are usually never that bad!) despite having had the complications.

It was fairly easy to pace myself over the following days and weeks, although there were times I perhaps pushed too hard, too soon, trying to be independent and not wanting to ask for help. It took about 6 weeks before I felt confident about carrying heavy shopping bags on the trek home on foot from the supermarket, but it was reasonably easy to take small amounts with me within 3 weeks or so. The body and mind have a great capacity for healing. By 8 weeks, both had healed better than I would have imagined and the trauma of the two ops already seemed like a distant memory. Now, one year later, it feels like it could have been as long as 5 years ago!

Having surgery in early March meant that it wasn't long before I could have my first binder-free summer. For most of my life, it has always taken a while each year for me to feel comfortable going out without a coat or jacket when the weather gets warmer as I tend to feel more self-conscious and exposed without layers of 'protection'. This time it still took a while to break free of this habitual pattern, but it wasn't long before I realised that I did have more body confidence. It was great to leave the house in just a t-shirt and shorts – probably the least amount of clothing I've worn outside in 40 years! Episodes of over-heating and panic attacks due to being too hot became a distant memory. This in turn led to more progress with my self-confidence and self-esteem.

After decades of feeling body conscious when female and binding for 3 years, I had become accustomed to hiding beneath layers and using stripes as camouflage. Since recovering from top surgery and finding this new confidence in myself, I've bought shirts and jumpers that I wouldn't have worn while binding. Having never worn a tie at school, I had to practice wearing one at home for a while, but then I went to a conference in a shirt and tie and didn't feel like a fraud! I've even bought a suit but haven't yet had the opportunity to wear it. It was about two to three months after surgery when I started to realise that a lot of my headspace had finally been freed up to think about other things like work. It was like my hard drive had been spring cleaned and I had more capacity to concentrate.

Don't underestimate how the uncertainty for waiting for the operation date can play on your mind. It is hard to accept uncertainty and the knowledge that it is completely outwith our control (being reliant on the NHS to suddenly tell us when a date for surgery is available). Also, don't worry if you find you go into a dip after surgery, whether it's just a counter-reaction to the big build up beforehand, a common reaction to the anaesthetic or simply wondering where your life is going now this has been achieved.

Trans people face so many challenges when we are starting to transition – taking a leap of faith in the dark that we are doing the right thing, telling family, friends, colleagues, endless waiting times, beginning hormone treatment that can lead to mood swings, navigating all aspects of our life in new ways. So it's often the case that we don't have the best mental wellbeing by the time we've fought our way through to the point of getting surgery. But it's still worth trying to get in the best physical and emotional shape that we can manage before having any operation. I was lucky to have started learning mindfulness about two years before surgery and this has helped me immensely. I'm still learning about the body-mind connection but I'm glad I've started to feel my way into it and much of that progress has come since surgery.

I feel much more at home in my own body now. I spent so many decades feeling disconnected from it and living only in my head, as if brain and body had to be two separate entities in order to survive the constant struggle. It's still a work in progress, but I feel a much greater sense of wholeness now that I'm not spending half my brain capacity on blanking out bits of my body. It's as though body and brain are aligning more and more. I feel as though I'm able to inhabit my own skin and enjoy being me at last.

Daniel Mackenzie-Winters has written up this account of having top surgery in the hope that it might be useful to other trans masculine folk who may still be on the waiting list. If you have any questions, please contact Daniel in total confidence, via the magazine at undividinglines@mail.com, and we will be more than happy to forward your message to him so he can get in touch with you.

Resources

North Manchester General Hospital: www.pat.nhs.uk/our-services/general-surgery-gender.htm

From April 2020, NHS Scotland has contracts with top surgery teams in hospitals other than just Manchester so Scottish patients will now have a choice. See: www.ngicns.scot.nhs.uk/nhsservices/adults/surgery/surgery-providers/

UK vlogger Finn's top surgery playlist and useful tips: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-xdbMjLqelL6-Rc2qxqVP565qMpucGBn

Trans Masculine Scotland can be found on Facebook: www.facebook.com/transmasculinescotland/ and on their website: www.transmascot.wordpress.com

FTM London website: www.ftmlondon.org.uk

Hudson's FTM Resource Guide www.ftmguide.org and FTM Terminology Guide www.ftmguide.org/terminology.html

The Gift of a Lifetime: How Trans 'Top Surgery' Changed My Life
www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jun/30/trans-top-surgery-changed-my-life

Growing your own Genitals

A Lower Surgery Diary



At the end of January 2020 I saw Dr Gibson at Inverness Gender Identity Clinic and said I would be interesting in exploring my options for metoidioplasty. I was aware it could easily take 8-12 months to get an appointment at the Sandyford Clinic to see a psychologist or psychiatrist for the required referral and it could take another 3-6 months for the paperwork and funding application. So I put it to Dr Gibson that it could take up to 18 months before I could meet with the London surgeon, Mr Christopher, and ask any questions about my suitability for metoidioplasty or 'meta' as it's often called for short. She offered to email St Peter's in London to ask if it would be possible to meet him and ask questions first. I was extremely surprised when she phoned me a week later to say that Mr Christopher had agreed to see me and was coming up to the Sandyford for a clinic on 2nd March. The following day somebody from St Peter's rang me to make the appointment. It felt like Christmas had suddenly come very early and out of the blue!

I went down to Glasgow on the train from Inverness and it was a long 12-hour day for a 20-minute appointment but it was very useful and I'm grateful to have had this opportunity to meet Mr Christopher. Apparently it is quite common for him to see people on a pre-referral basis, but maybe it's not widely known that this is possible. It transpired that he was seeing 12 patients at 20-minute intervals before getting the train to Newcastle for a clinic the next day.

First of all, he took a medical history (asking about any operations, broken bones, allergies, medication) and asked about my job and whether I had a partner. He wanted to know how long I'd been on testosterone and said that you need to be on 'T' at least 2 years before undergoing metoidioplasty to ensure there has been sufficient clitoral growth. I had been expecting that he would want to examine me, but this wasn't the case as he said that they work with whatever anatomy you've got.

I explained that, for a variety of reasons, I wanted the least invasive option possible and didn't want hysterectomy, vaginectomy or urethral lengthening – just the metoidioplasty and testicular implants. He said he could do this in 2 stages:

Stage 1 – metoidioplasty and scrotoplasty (requiring a catheter for 7-10 days)

Stage 2 – mons resection and testicular implants (requiring a drain while in hospital for a day or two)

I forgot to ask about the interval between the two ops but I think it's likely to be 6-12 months. He showed me a few photos on his phone and also let me feel one of the small testicular implants.

When I said I didn't want phalloplasty with an arm graft, he said he could do the abdominal version or take a skin graft from my thigh (which I had read about, but discounted). I think he said that this could be done without hysterectomy or urethral lengthening (which I hadn't realised). Had I been 30 years younger, I may well have opted for phalloplasty but I don't think I could put myself through it now. Phalloplasty is much more invasive and intensive than metoidioplasty, requires multiple surgeries and has longer recovery times, which is not ideal when you live alone and are self-employed.

So he discussed a lot of possible options and stages for both phalloplasty and metoidioplasty, and there was a great deal of information to take in, but I was still keen to stick with my original decision to have the simple metoidioplasty with implants. Ten days later I received a letter in the post outlining what we had discussed.

Meeting him was very positive. I didn't feel rushed and I had time to ask anything and everything I wanted. No question felt stupid. He is very easy going and there was no sense of the hierarchy that you sometimes get with doctor/patient consultations. I certainly felt comfortable with him and I know he has a very good international reputation too, so I would feel in safe hands when it gets to the point of surgery.

The current waiting time from consultation to surgery is about 12 months. I asked how many ops they do each year and he said 100 phallo and 20 meta (not sure whether he meant him personally or the London team as a whole as he works with 2 or 3 other surgeons).

Speaking with him clarified quite a few things for me, although subsequently also brought some other questions to mind – but I feel ok that these can be answered at a later date. The main thing is he didn't say anything which put me off, so I'm happy to continue on the referral pathway. I estimate it could be another 12-18 months before I see Mr Christopher again. While I was there, I asked the Sandyford receptionist about waiting times for me to see a psychologist to get the referral, but they couldn't say anything other than to try phoning if I've heard nothing in 6 months.

I'm glad I did quite a bit of research before going for the appointment as it got me thinking about it in more depth and helped to clarify a few things in my own mind. This feels very different to the decision for top surgery as that felt very much more of a 'need' as well as a 'want'. It was an easy decision to make as I couldn't have carried on wearing the binder indefinitely, and not wearing it with a female chest wasn't an option either.

This feels like more of a 'want' than a 'need'. I could live without it as I don't have that much dysphoria about what's there at the moment, it's just that I wish for the bits that are missing. So that is the balancing act going forwards – do I want it enough to go through with surgery and all that it could entail: waiting times, pain, recovery, being reliant on others to help, then repeating it all for a second op, etc? And do I want to spend the next 3-4 years on a treadmill of waiting for the NHS to get through all the various hoops to the final outcome? Or do I just call it quits now and get on with living my life? But as a friend pointed out, the latter option could end up carrying a heavy burden of regret. Now I've started growing my own genitals on testosterone, do I have the balls to continue with surgery?

I think I have wanted male genitals since 15/16 years of age, but largely suppressed it prior to transitioning. With top surgery it was fairly easy to imagine what the physical changes would be like, but it's a lot harder to imagine what the results will be like with these lower operations (despite seeing some photos online) as everyone's anatomy is a bit different.

I think I may have underestimated the psychological results that came with having top surgery which improved my body confidence more than I imagined. I suspect there is a huge psychological boost to be gained from having the ultimate outcome of further masculinising my anatomy so that it aligns with my brain.

Official website of St Peter's surgical team: www.andrology.co.uk

Two recommended accounts from people who have had metoidioplasty stages 1 & 2 are by: YouTuber Jammidodger www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-0YKcHTcQh2gagtjkI3W1C_mJ1Y8LmL1 and UK blogger Alix Coe <https://coefitness.com/2019/05/30/metoidioplasty-stage-one/>

Out There, In Here

Out there on the western fringe the perfect day for a picnic is as rare as a Sunday spent playing with you on the swings. If it's not the midges it's the wind. If it's not the wind it's the rain. If it's not the rain it's the cold. And if it's not the cold then it's just...my perception of what is and what is not a perfect picnic day. But not this day. Today the conditions and my perception match.

Out there today the sun is warm, the breeze is gentle, the sky is blue. It's that time of the year when the machair looks like an embroidered quilt of a million different hues lying gently over the edge of the land. Where the storms that we watch in the winter try their best to scour this bright jewel away. Today the air is calm and the waves roll in almost silently as if not to disturb us.

Out there on the edge of our little picnic group, cocooned in the long grass, you and I lie facing each other. You have an apple and I have a camera. There is enough space between us for a thousand tall, apple-green grasses to gently wave their greetings to and fro. Yet we are close enough for your grass-green apple to sound loud as you crunch into it, smiling.

Out there in our shared patch of the western fringe there seems little else, no-one else, to break this brief spell of magic. A moment of connection that is composed of such small but vitally important details. Your cheeky cow's lick of hair curling back over to graze your forehead. A hint of your perfect smile. A look in your eyes that both promises much and says only what matters.

Out there we look at each other, parent and child. The easy way that we hold each other's gaze, that we know we love and are loved, is unbreakable. Until you gaze back at your apple. You're only five, there are priorities to consider. You look back to me and the shutter clicks capturing and at once shattering our perfect moment.

In here on my wall hangs our photograph. It's in a place where I see it every day, twice every day, three times every day. Whenever I look, which is often. Twenty-three years have passed since you and I captured that moment. There is enough space between us for a thousand more memories to have passed gently to and fro. Not all of them come with photographs like this one.

In here with a thousand newer memories I now see more in your knowing, inscrutable look. I see your insatiable desire to go your own way. I see your wicked humour. I see your beautiful and amazing intelligence shining like a beacon. Your empathy. I see laughter and tears, and all the times you were more than you needed to be. I see all that you have become. In that one look.

In here I am surrounded by more photographs than I know what to do with. But a photograph like this photograph, one that captures your essence and the deepest love. A photograph that grows with every passing year, every deliciously long look. That's a photograph that is as rare as a perfect picnic day out there on the western fringe.



Sand Owsnett

Poems

It's Just the Beginning

Standing at the devil's door
Scorched to the core

So many broken faces
All fading and wasted

Enduring the burden of living
The weight of breathing

Slowly shuffling in procession
To the ultimate ascension

Transgression

Undone by

A simple mistake

Dissemble the truth

Following without seeing

The silent façade

A dancing masquerade

Cloak nor dagger

A thinly veiled pretence

Friend nor foe

Discarded by omission

Shunned

Highland Pride History: Past and Present

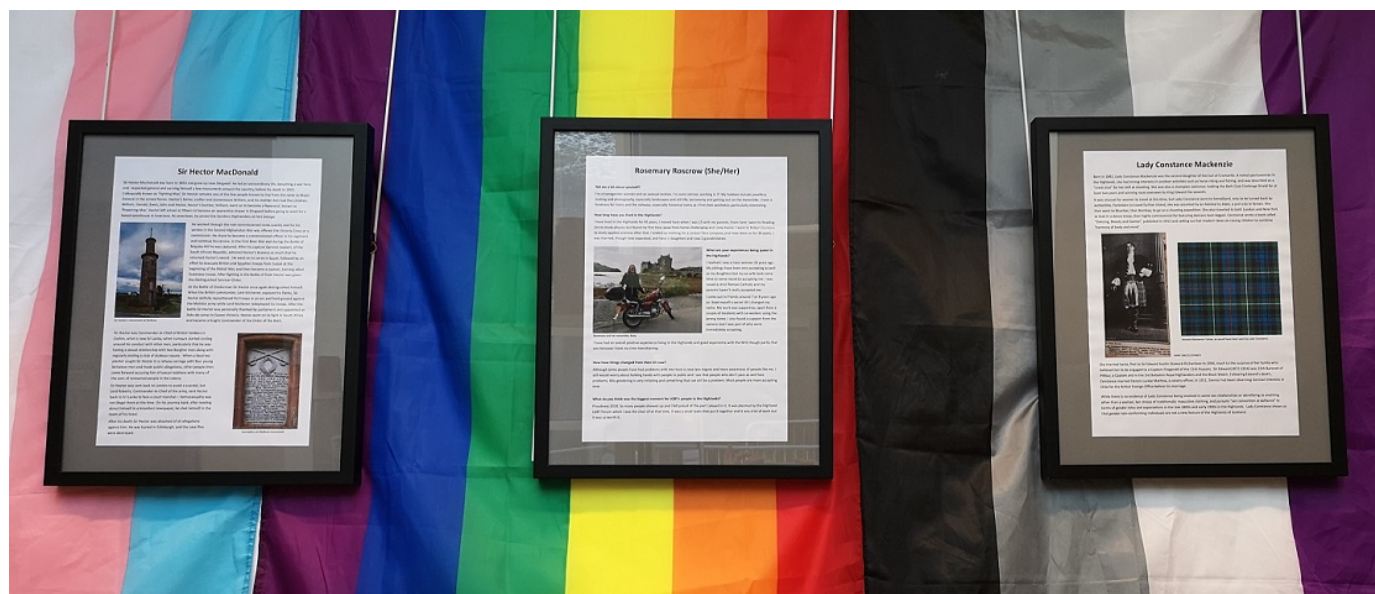
Community Gallery, Inverness Museum, February 2020

Amongst the array of events held in the Highlands as part of both LGBT History Month and Highland Pride's first Winter Pride, Inverness Museum staged *Highland Pride History: Past and Present*. Curated and compiled by Robyn Dyaln Whyte the exhibition brought together three historical and three current figures to introduce the region's LGBT community: Sand Owsnett, Kevin Crowe and Rosemary Roscrow alongside Lady Constance Mackenzie, Sir Hector MacDonald and Lady Vere Hobart.

As part of the exhibition, *UnDividingLines* was delighted to be asked if the most recent issue of the magazine, guest edited by Ciaran Lucas Wilson, could take its place amongst the other exhibits and, naturally, we were only too happy to agree! So, all thanks to Robyn, the first ever 'official' hard copy of the magazine was on display. And it looked amazing!

Thank you to Robyn for all the work they put in to giving our community such prominent and well-organsided exposure at a venue that so many people, locals and tourists alike, will have visited and enjoyed.

For further details about Highland Pride, including updates on the next Pride march scheduled for July 27th 2020 visit their website: www.highlandpride.org



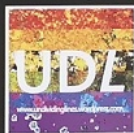
100

CONTRIBUTORS

To every single one of the 100 contributors who have helped make UnDividingLines everything it is today...

| | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Belinn Alce | Sarah Fanet | Rodney Mackay | Gary Pilkington |
| Ewan Armstrong | Peter MacDonald Fergusson | Kellan MacInnes | Willie Rennie |
| Grant Anderson | Alan Findlay | Janica Mackay | Leigh Riggs |
| Carrie Bates | Sarah Findlay | Daniel Mackenzie-Winters | Charlie O'Rourke Robertson |
| Alice J Brown | Ross Findland | Ken MacLennan | Rosemary, Inverness |
| Ian Brown | John Finnie | Helena MacLeod | Gail Ross |
| Paul Brownsey | Jay Fletcher | Robert MacLeod | Liz Sandeman |
| Stuart Isaac Burnside | Tom Foy | Edward C MacMillan | Katie Sarra |
| Sarah Burton | Darryl Geegan | Elaine Maher | Gill Shaw |
| Donald Busby | Julia Gordon | Craig Manson | Shaun Simon |
| Gill Chadwick | Brian Green | Hannah McEwan | Jo Smithson |
| Sue Christie | Liam Hay | Lesley McKenzie | Jenny Sprenger |
| Jacqui Collins | Jackie Henderson | Estelle McNeill | Claire Stewart |
| James Cook | Florence Jansen | John Mills | Allison Sutherland |
| Rebecca Louise Cooper | Laura Johnson | Shirley Mitchinson | Liam Stevenson |
| Rosemary Cooper | Linda Kirkland | Robin Mouatt | Philipp Tanzer |
| Morgan Cowley | Karlheinz Kolnegg | Jonathan Murray | Jess Taylor |
| Katie Crook | Clr Emma Knox | Chris Noble | Kate Tweddle |
| Kevin Crowe | Dawn Kotschjew | Revd Peter W Nimmo | Simon Venn |
| David Downing | Tom Lavery | Joy Ogunyemi-Ferguson | Richard Walsh |
| Michael Dresser | Lindsay Linning | Conor O'Hara | Roz White |
| Shay Duffy | Simon Long | Sand Owsnett | Sarah White |
| Judith Dumont | Marcas Mac an Tuairneir | Ryan Paschke | Robyn Dylan Whyte |
| Carl Easton | Ellen MacAskill | Jane B Patten | Spencer Woodcock |
| Kate Fairclough | Claran Lucas MacDonald | | Jeff Zimmer |

Thank you!



UnDividingLines

There are Queer Things Going On in the Highlands & Islands

Autumn 2019/Winter 2020



In Conversation With...

Daniel Mackenzie-Winters

Stonewall: A Reappraisal Jeff Zimmer Proud Scotland Awards
 Sarah Fanet Highland History Proud Ness Hebridean Pride
 History Rewritten: The Ultimate Betrayal McNeill Holiday Lets LGBT+ Progress
 Why We March Jane Patten Views From The Crowe's Nest and much much more...

UnDividingLines Writers' Showcase

Eden Court, Inverness, February 25th 2020

As part of February's LGBT History Month and Highland Pride's Winter Pride events, UnDividingLines staged a free evening of readings and performance by a commendably inclusive selection of just some of its contributors, and all three of its guest editors, from the first 12 issues over the last 6 years.

Organised and introduced by long-time UnDividingLines contributor and, as was soon to be announced, also the new editor taking over the magazine from April this year, the overwhelming atmosphere in Eden Court's Maclean Room was one of enthusiasm, engagement and positivity.

The current editor, and founder of UnDividingLines, David Downing, opened the evening by talking about where the germ of the idea for the magazine came from and how that developed into the first ever issue being published back in October 2014. He also talked about the magazine's name and how that came about, but the emphasis was soon back on recognising, and thanking, everyone who had been involved with the magazine, thus far, for making the venture such a resounding success. There was also the emphasis on the strong ability for the magazine to not only endure, in the longterm, but thrive, based on the core values upon which it was established and which remain central to its success:

"UnDividingLines has a formula that works extremely well, one that allows everyone to be included. It's also entirely sustainable as a project that can be run in its entirety on a zero budget. And it will continue with its core values of: individuals, inclusion and independence. It's *never* been an ego project; *never* been about power or control or competition; there's *never ever* been a negative agenda whatsoever – it's *always* been about bringing something wholly positive to the Highlands and Islands LGBT+ community. And that will continue because that's what UnDividingLines is about."

Jane Patten read her contribution to the next issue of the magazine: a short story that follows her tradition of superbly poised historical fiction, and was followed by Ciaran Lucas Wilson's wholly absorbing and wise look at the under-explored subject of, first and foremost, learning to love ourselves.

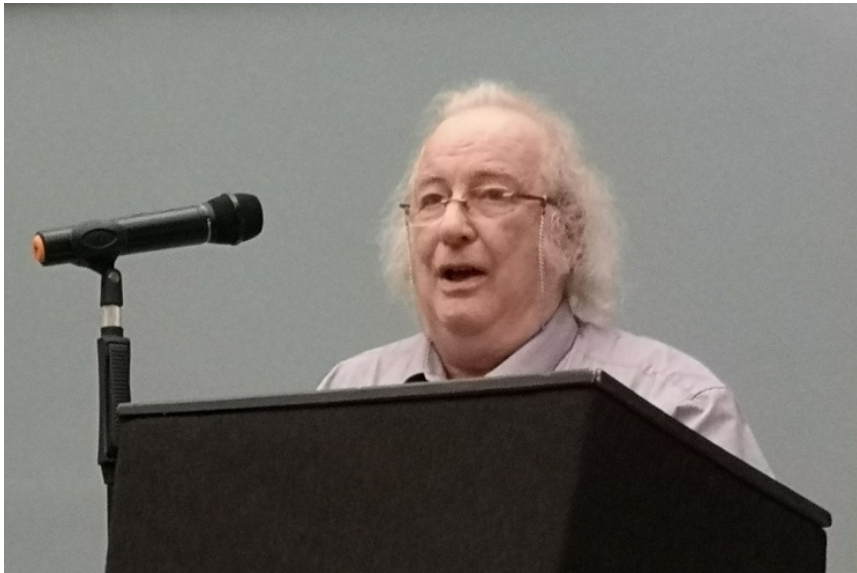
Alice Brown performed two sets of her own music to contribute a further perspective on the notion of 'writer' to the proceedings and was enthusiastically received by all who were there, and then Kevin Crowe read the title story from his powerful first short story collection *No Home In this World*.

The indomitable Shirley Mitchinson recounted her experience of getting snow-lost in the Highland hills despite having already completed a full round of all the Munros, a tale that not only relayed her love of the Scottish mountains but also the spiritual connection many walkers share when alone in the wilderness. And the evening was rounded off by Roz White who, having read from her acclaimed fiction at a previous Winter Pride event, shared her article for UnDividingLines about the experience of trying to write the trans experience.

A superb evening that received excellent feedback from attendees and speakers alike, and one that deserves to become an annual event. For UnDividingLines it helped prove, yet again, that not only are queer things going on in the Highlands and Islands, but also that, as the magazine often asserts, everyone is welcome.



Alice Brown



Kevin Crowe



Ciaran Lucas Wilson



Roz White



Shirley Mitchinson

UnDividingLines

Origins, Evolution and Looking Forwards

What inspired the creation of an LGBT+ magazine for the Highlands and Islands?

The closer my involvement with the Highlands and Islands LGBT+ community became the more it was apparent that the diverse array of individual voices, opinions and experiences we offer was simply not being adequately acknowledged or shared. Too often we were finding ourselves being spoken for in anonymising collective terms by the same few people, both locally and nationally, or stymied by those who felt they alone were entitled to determine what we as a community wanted, meaning that individual – let alone dissenting – voices were finding themselves silenced. The power of a unified voice shouldn't be underestimated, nor should the good intentions and dedication of many of those who aim to represent us, but we as individuals and as a community are so much more complex, rich, eclectic and nuanced than people, both within and outwith our community, were getting to witness.

Although there were a few established LGBT+ groups within the Highlands and Islands, as well others that would come and go, it seemed that there might be another way to more effectively address at least some of the issues the Highlands and Islands LGBT+ community faces, such as social isolation; limited scope to share and learn from common experiences; barriers created by the need to hide sexuality or gender behind the facades of 'the closet'; and lack of a sense of coherent year-round community. To bring as many people as possible together would require the ability to transcend many of the barriers and limitations that had prevented it happening already. So the question was: how to enable readily accessible region-wide engagement of effectively shared diverse, authentic and inclusive voices, that might reflect a more realistic and representational sense of community?

It seemed that establishing a grassroots Highlands and Islands LGBT+ magazine that could help deliver a more complete sense of what it is to be an LGBT+ person in the Highlands and Islands in the early decades of the 21st century, in our own words and on our own terms, could be a really positive thing. Not only would it allow us unfettered expression of who we are but it would also connect us on a very real level, regardless of many of the usual perceived limitations. These voices, unlike so many from our past that have been silenced and lost forever, might also go on to be preserved for the future.

How did this go from an idea to reality?

Well, it felt like a great idea and back in early 2014 it was mentioned to a few people who, to be honest, I expected to pick it up and run with it. Everyone agreed that it was an excellent idea, but then turned to me and asked when I was going to do it? I genuinely hadn't expected that! I had relatively few connections within the local LGBT+ community, no experience whatsoever of article-writing let alone setting up or running a magazine, desktop publishing, editing, promotion... anything. But sometimes, if you believe in something enough, you just have to roll up your sleeves, give it your best shot and make it happen. So that's what I did.

First off it seemed important to try to write an article myself in order to understand exactly what I was going to be asking other people to do, then get it set out in a format that would work within a magazine context,

and be confident that I could do justice to anyone who believed in the project enough to contribute. I set about researching and writing an article about HIV, a subject that seemed (and still seems) under-addressed in the region, and one that I hoped would be adequate as a topic to interest, educate and connect the widest number of readers. Writing it, and setting it out for the yet unnamed magazine, was a slow but fascinating process and, by the time it was done, I had much greater faith in my ability to deliver a magazine that the Highland and Islands LGBT+ community might be willing to embrace.

How did you get people to contribute to that very first issue?

A few people said they would be willing to support the magazine idea by writing something for it and several were kind enough to ask other people who they thought might also be willing to invest the time and effort into this untried and untested idea. I was also lucky enough to be given contact details of an array of people who had been involved with other LGBT+ projects and so was able to contact them directly with view a to becoming either contributors and/or the magazine's very first potential readers. I have a huge amount of respect for everyone who, in turn, had faith in the idea of the magazine – and my ability to deliver it – not just to write for that issue but also to trust me to present their work in a way that they would be happy with. And so, slowly, articles arrived and it all started to come together.

Where did the title come from?

Having decided that two issues a year would probably be the optimum frequency to ensure there was sufficient time and material to produce a full and good quality magazine on a longterm basis the working title I came up with was *Equinox*, with publication aimed at the Spring and Autumn equinoxes. However, when the Highland LGBT Lives art exhibition was being talked about back in late 2013, *UnDividingLines* had been put forward as a possible title for the gender-themed gallery. This was rejected in favour of *Changing Times*, but it seemed such a great title that it shouldn't be left to go to waste, and it lent itself so perfectly to a magazine that it seemed almost fated that it hadn't been selected for the exhibition. So there it was, the magazine's title, the *Lines* in slanted font to suggest different, or additional, perspectives, and the U working its way through each consecutive colour of the Rainbow Flag every 6 issues to further suggest an aim to cover as many facets of our community's experience as possible. It was only sometime afterwards (while checking no copyright had been breached by using the title – it hadn't!) that I learnt about Plato's concept of *The Dividing Line* where, in very simple terms, he separated knowledge from opinion. However, the intention of the magazine was to reunite – undivide – knowledge and opinion, so *UnDividingLines* was even more perfect in that context. The magazine's title continues to embody as many elements as possible of what the magazine aims to achieve, without being overtly self-conscious of its attempt to do so. For brevity, the title has increasingly been informally initialised into UDL and that also has something of a nice ring to it.

It also seemed useful to try to somehow incorporate the umbrella-term 'queer' to suggest a blurring of the pigeonholes of, and therefore a community less divided by, the initialism of 'LGBT+' so the subtitle 'There are Queer Things Going on in the Highlands and Islands' was included, which has worked well as a byline. The original publication date idea was then tweaked so that the magazine would now go out on the days the clocks changed at the end of March and October.

Finally, the magazine's rainbow flag logo was taken from an exhibit displayed during Highland LGBT+ Lives and its title – *A Sense of Belonging* – sat really well with the concept of the magazine. So all stars were aligning.

What was the response to that first issue?

It was a nail-biting morning on Sunday 26th October 2014 when the first issue of *UnDividingLines* sat fully completed and the 'send' button was pressed to deliver it by email to everyone on the mailing list. It had been checked, rechecked, checked again, and then again, to ensure that everything was OK and fingers were crossed that nothing had been overlooked or missed out. There is a very strange stillness, even now, after an issue of the magazine goes out following the ever-increasing behind-the-scenes energy that leads to the pages finally coming together, but it has always been worth it and no-matter-what every issue has gone out on time.

Particularly with that first issue it was a nervous time waiting to see what the all-important response from the LGBT+ community might be, but the reactions soon started coming in and they were all so incredibly positive that everything had been pitched well and received successfully. People seemed to genuinely not quite believe that the Highlands and Islands could do something like this and have a voice without agenda or censorship. It was a unique project as far as Scotland, and indeed the UK, was concerned. The reaction from the LGBT+ community reinforced that the magazine must be a longterm project that would continue to exist and grow while also ensuring that the community felt it remained relevant – too many things seem inclined to arrive full of promise only to then disappear again before they have had time to take hold, which really just serves to perpetuate negative disillusionment and disenchantment. *UnDividingLines* was not going to fuel this, it was going to be something more robust, representative and enduring.

What hadn't been expected was the interest outwith the Highlands and Islands. The magazine was requested from across the UK, Europe, America and beyond, and by both LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ people, academics, organisations and so on. *UnDividingLines* appeared to have connected with some greater need or desire beyond our local community and that was something of a welcome surprise.

How did the magazine develop from there on in?

It's all well and good getting one issue out, but to survive – let alone aim towards longevity and growth – more people had to want, and feel able, to contribute. With issue two, and with every issue since, it has felt rather precarious at the outset as each issue starts with a blank canvas and the uncertainty of whether or not anyone will contribute, but then the call for submissions goes out and a wonderfully disparate array of people come forward and volunteer to write something they want to share or feel is important. There are now a few people who have become regulars within the magazine's pages, and all the different contributors combine to give a pretty inclusive and eclectic array of articles in each issue. To develop this further, alternate issues now have a different guest editor which ensures new and diverse perspectives are featured and the increased inclusion of people – both as contributors and readers – who we might not have otherwise reached.

What are the criteria for inclusion in the magazine?

This is very simple really: from the outset it was important that everyone had an equal chance to be heard, if they wanted to, so the criteria for inclusion was, and remains, that anyone from within the Highlands and Island LGBT+ community, either born here or who have moved here, can write whatever they want. Anyone else, regardless of gender, sexuality or where they live, can contribute articles directly relevant to the Highlands and Islands LGBT+ community. The emphasis is on individuals only, so groups or organisations are included sparingly and by invite only to ensure the magazine remains about and for grassroots voices and doesn't become just another vehicle for groups or organisations to self-promote. All contributors are also encouraged to write from a constructive and positive perspective as there is really nothing worthwhile to be gained from sharing cynicism or fuelling petty infighting. Fortunately those few who wish to sneer or snipe tend to hide themselves away in their cliques in the shadier corners of Facebook and the like so their impact is negligible.

It is something to be proud of that UnDividingLines has been able to print every single article it has ever received without any form of compromise – that says a lot about the quality of the voices that had previously been left unheard. If anyone feels a little intimidated or uncertain about their ability to write something ‘publishable’ then we will work with them to ensure they are happy with how they come across and provide editorial and proofreading support so that they can be sure they get to say things how they want to in an effective way that remains true to their own voice and perspective. Every contributor has the final say on whether or not their finished article is included and if they are not happy in any way then the article will not be published until they are, though there has never yet been any need to withhold any completed article.

One further consideration was made too, and that was the balance between quality and accessibility. The magazine needed to be visually appealing, well set out and poised comfortably between being open and professional – it was important that contributors felt their time and effort were respected whilst the format should never be intimidating or off-putting for potential contributions. The magazine appears to have been very successful in achieving this and so has remained in essentially the same format and layout as that very first issue.

Over the first dozen issues UnDividingLines has firmly established the all-important cornerstones upon which the magazine is built. They are: **inclusivity, individuality, quality and independence.**

The magazine is produced on a zero budget. Why is that important and is it sustainable?

To remain independent and free to express any and every opinion without restriction or conflicting agenda it was important that the magazine was not tied to anyone else. Similarly, the precariousness and unreliability of funding, with the possibility of not being able to say certain things, or having to promote products or services as a ‘payment’ for financial input, was simply not what the magazine was – or ever will be – about.

The software used to produce the magazine is freeware available online for anyone to download; everyone contributes their time for free; the magazine is circulated via electronic format only and therefore incurs no printing or distribution costs; promotion is entirely by word of mouth or online which, again, is free. There really was no need to make it a financial concern in any way and this avoids the need for a committee, a constitution, treasurers, charitable status and all manner of other limiting administrative nightmares that would only clog the works and dull down what is essentially a very simple and easy process to produce the magazine. And yes, it is absolutely sustainable, far more sustainable than any other option. It was a good decision made at the outset, and to run the magazine any other way would only serve to detract from what it is about and what it is achieving.

Does UnDividingLines have an online presence?

That’s a horrible phrase but yes it does. The magazine’s website is www.undividinglines.wordpress.com which was free to set up, is free to run and is free to access. It is a simple and uncluttered one-page site that simply contains links to all issues of the magazine. The magazine has kept clear of image-only Instagram and the highly limited scope of Twitter, both being anathema to what UnDividingLines is about.

UnDividingLines does have a Facebook account which was, and remains, a necessary evil to ensure publicity is free, and it serves to offer a fast and convenient connection to a global online community. However, our Facebook usage is carefully considered, with posts that try to offer useful and informative local content, and our approach certainly isn’t the usual indiscriminate ‘share’ mentality that too often passes as a means of hiding a lack of genuine and unique contribution to the LGBT+ community or as a

way of creating an illusion of a coherent and connected network of people or organisations. Too much of what gets posted online by too many people and groups adheres to what Highlander Kal Turnbull, founder of the *Change A View* website www.changeaview.com, has decried, saying "the quality of most online conversations is dire. Facebook and Twitter are filled with angry shouting (or mindless agreement), people talking past each other, fallacious reasoning, and lies. And that's before you even get to the trolls, the propaganda, the fake news, and the disinformation. Users are caught in filter bubbles and echo chambers, which they leave only to yell at their opponents and wage poorly-punctuated battles against their perceived enemies. Much of what passes for political discourse is either vigorous groupthink agreement or nasty sniping." www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-48579597 I adhere to this perspective. Even Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the worldwide web, bemoans the "outraged and polarised tone and quality of online discourse" www.webfoundation.org/2019/03/web-birthday-30/. Facebook is a means to an end, but our involvement in this distorting realm remains reluctant and, if there was another way, we would take it. *UnDividingLines* really does want to be an antidote to the fast drip-feed of negative and ignorant egotism and noddling-dog responses of so much social media activity and so far the very existence of the magazine has been a means of helping counter this.

Where is UnDividingLines produced and who is the team behind it?

Ah, well, the behind-the-scenes stuff has been intentionally downplayed as the magazine was never ever intended to be an ego project and it remains important that the entire focus is on those who write for it and those who read it. What I will say is that each issue so far has been produced by just one person from a spare bedroom in Wester Ross, using nothing but a regular PC and good intentions! Though there are also a few people who provide regular contributions, such as Kevin Crowe with his own *Views From the Crowe's Nest* feature that closes each issue of the magazine, and a wonderful proof reader in Shirley Mitchinson whose eagle eye would be noticed more for its absence than its subtle presence. The title of Editor was given by one of the readers and that stuck as a way for people to identify that there was someone who was running the magazine and was the first point of contact, though who that person was remained, and remains, immaterial as long as they came from amongst our local LGBT+ community. Really I think the Editor should stay mostly quiet and invisible behind the scenes, serving only to enable others, for once, to take the limelight.

What would you say have been the highlights of UnDividingLines so far?

Genuinely there have been so many! The whole project has been a joy to be part of from the very outset. The fact that issue one came together in a format that worked well and has endured and evolved with such great feedback from contributors and readers has to be the most important thing. Issue 11 was the largest ever issue at 115 pages and marked our 1000th published page and our 100th published contributor – these were great milestones that reinforced that *UnDividingLines* is here to stay. Being described as "brilliant" by Pink Saltire was a less conspicuous yet no less welcome affirmation that people were recognising and appreciating what we were doing, as was the surprise of getting shortlisted for the Icon Awards after just two issues. Going on to win the national Arts and Media award at the inaugural Proud Scotland Awards in 2019 was further amazing recognition for not only those who have written for the magazine but for the Highland and Islands LGBT+ community as a whole. And there was the article about the magazine that stated it was produced from its headquarters in Inverness – nothing could be further from the truth but it was nice that people felt the quality of the magazine warranted that set up to be able to make it happen.

It may sound like a cliché, though is totally true, that the response from people who contribute and are able to get their voices heard has remained the main motivator and being able to deliver something that makes

that possible is the greatest reward. Some people have been so open about their lives and shared very personal experiences with others in order to help the wider community that it is very humbling, particularly some of the submissions from within the trans community, and then there are those who are brave enough to open up about wider aspects of their lives in the main *In Conversation With...* articles. When I look at the website and see each and every cover I am so proud of them and of everything the magazine stands for and has already achieved.

How do you gauge UnDividingLines' success?

As you might suspect, not by Facebook 'likes'! We are in a strange period where social media responses are mostly vacuous yet are still seen as a (or sometimes the only) gauge of success. It's clearly a nonsense, no matter how it might be argued otherwise: Facebook 'likes' simply do not correlate meaningfully with realworld achievement. Additionally the magazine's circulation numbers remain unknown – the figure doesn't exist – people can request copies, forward email copies, print copies, download them from the website or from anyone who shares them, so there is no way of monitoring that, which I think is quite a healthy thing: how many copies sent out would make it worth, or not worth, doing and who is to judge? By not having funders or grant bodies to justify ourselves to we don't have to consider our worth in this way, nor do we have to be populist at the expense of other more important values.

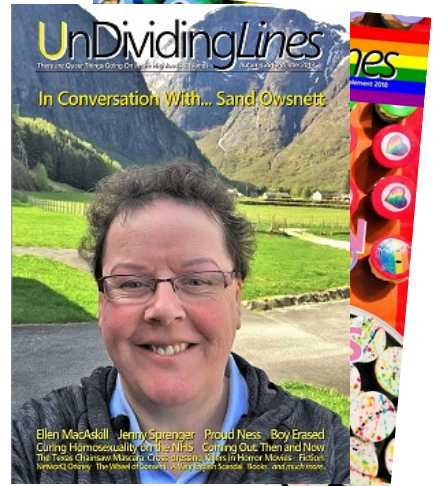
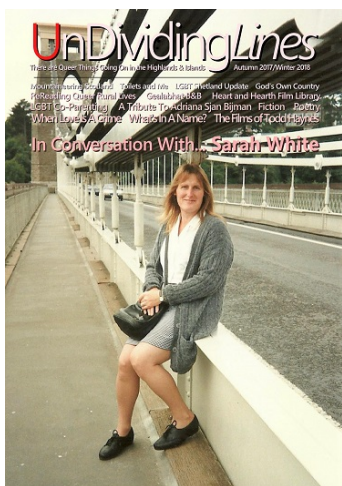
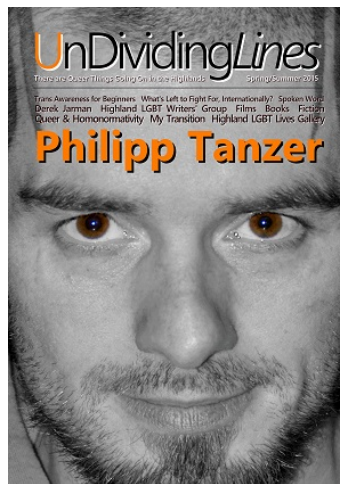
So I suppose UnDividingLines is a success as long as it remains true to its solidly positive core values, people write for it and enjoy receiving it. It's that simple.

What is the future for UnDividingLines?

Predictions for the future in the media seem to suggest that there will be an increase in circumspection with regard to social media and the negative impact it has on individual, and thereby social, wellbeing and a move towards a renewed belief in grassroots activities. UnDividingLines is there already and certainly applauds that shift in direction! The magazine will, I trust, have a long and celebrated future and will endure as long as someone is prepared to produce it and individuals within our community have something to say and are willing to contribute.

One change that is on the horizon is that, after issue 12 goes out, there will be a new editor taking over. 6 years at the helm has allowed me to contribute everything I can and the magazine now needs new energy and perspectives behind the scenes just as it requires these within the pages of each issue. Choosing a successor who could be trusted to keep UnDividingLines free, independent and ensure it remains a quality grassroots magazine was actually quite simple – several people expressed an interest and each would have gone on to do a great job (and may well get the opportunity to do so in future) – however Kevin Crowe has been with the magazine since day 1, has a wide and inclusive knowledge and approach to LGBT+ issues, and ideas about how to expand the magazine while retaining its core integrity and values so, from April 2020 he will be taking over as editor and producer of the magazine. He will be both robust and resilient in his approach to keeping it true to everything it has come to represent and, in time, ensure it is passed on to another editor who will do the same.

UnDividingLines has certainly been an amazing venture to get up and going and to be part of for the last 6 years and I'm very proud of what it has been already achieved. Although I will miss it, I look forward to receiving each future issue and watching the magazine continue to grow, and to learning more about all the queer things that are going on in the Highlands and Islands. For UnDividingLines this is just the beginning.



Views From The Crowe's Nest



SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I LEAVE?

Like the majority of Scottish voters, I voted to remain in the EU. What does it say for power relationships within the UK when the views of two of the four nations in the Union (Scotland and Northern Ireland) are ignored and when one nation (England) can ride roughshod over the views of the others? It seems clear that the myth of the UK being a union of equal nations has been well and truly exploded. However, these discussions are for another day. Whether we like it or not we have now left the EU and, if the government keeps to the proposed timetable, by the end of the year the transition period will be over.

What are the implications for LGBT+ people?

Some have suggested that leaving the EU will not affect our current rights and on one level this is correct. Most of the rights we have gained over recent decades have had, on the face of it, little to do with the EU. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has been responsible for forcing Westminster to extend our rights (for example, on an equal age of consent, LGBT rights in the military and decriminalisation of male homosexuality in Northern Ireland) but the ECHR is not an institution of the EU and we were signatories to the court long before we joined the EU and remain one now we have left. Also, some equality legislation, such as same sex marriage and adoption rights, came about as a result of debates and campaigns within the UK.

However, this is not the complete picture. The *EU Charter of 2000* bans discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, and earlier in 1997 the *Amsterdam Treaty* banned discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Also, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), which is very different from the ECHR, has stated that discriminating against trans people is sex discrimination and therefore illegal within the EU. This has meant that in the UK our sex discrimination laws also protect trans people.

As of 31st December 2020 all EU laws will cease to apply in the UK, but the UK government has said that all current EU laws will become part of UK law. With one important exception: the EU Charter will no longer apply, and it is this Charter that bans discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. In addition, we will no longer be bound by the rulings of the CJEU, such as the one outlawing discrimination against trans people.

In reality, it is unlikely that any of our rights will be lost in the short term, partly because dismantling them will take up considerable parliamentary time. However, if at any stage in the future the UK government or any of the devolved administrations decide to erode those rights, we will not have access to the EU Charter, the various EU treaties and CJEU in defending those rights.

Furthermore, in 2017 the UK's Supreme Court used EU law to set aside unequal survivor pension rights between same sex and heterosexual married couples. No longer will the Supreme Court be able to do this, though it can still make rulings based on ECHR.

It has also been suggested that ditching the EU Charter could affect the rights of trans and non-binary people to vote. This is because the UK government has said it is going to introduce legislation requiring voters to produce acceptable ID before receiving their ballot papers. And under gender recognition

legislation in both Scotland and England, the process of legally changing one's gender can take years, so many trans people do not have ID that accords with their gender. This will change in Scotland if the proposed *Gender Recognition Act* ends up being passed by the Scottish parliament, but that is far from certain at the moment. If we were still in the EU, the government would have to ensure that trans people are not discriminated against in any new voting regulations.

Of course, a lot of this is speculation. But one thing is clear: leaving the EU means an uncertain future for LGBT+ rights in the UK. And that uncertainty is likely to impact on the way LGBT+ people vote in a future Scottish independence referendum.

A 200 YEAR OLD ALLY?

Two hundred years ago in Britain male homosexual behaviour was punishable by death and many 'sodomites' and 'mollies' were hanged. Both church and state considered sexual activity between men to be dangerous and evil, and even when the courts decided not to apply the death penalty other sanctions such as the pillory, imprisonment and transportation to a penal colony were imposed. Journals of the time also described mob attacks on those we would today call gays.

Although there had been a few voices in the establishment who argued that homosexuals should be treated with more sympathy, these were few and far between. And until recently we knew nothing about what ordinary people felt, after all not only was there no internet back then but also only a minority of people could read and write.

So the discovery of an early 19th century diary kept by Yorkshire farmer, Matthew Tomlinson, in which he uses religious arguments to call for a more sympathetic treatment of homosexuals has excited academics and activists alike.

The diary, which has been stored in Wakefield Library for decades, has only recently been transcribed and so the entries on homosexuality from 1810 only just discovered. Arguing that homosexuality was natural in some people and therefore comes from God, he wrote:

It must seem strange indeed that God Almighty should make a being with such a nature, or such a defect in nature; and at the same time make a decree that if that being whom he had formed, should at any time follow the dictates of that Nature, with which he has been formed, he should be punished with death.

This was an amazing statement for its time, both politically and theologically. The notion that homosexuality is a gift from God is a modern one and one that is still highly controversial, with the leaders of many faith groups still arguing that gay sex is wrong. Maybe we shouldn't be too surprised; perhaps then as now the views of the rank and file differed from what their religious leaders said.

Before we get too carried away, the diarist did distinguish between those whose sexuality was natural and those who chose to be homosexual and he thought the latter should be punished, but not with the death penalty.

Even so, his diary is yet another indication that attitudes in the early 19th century were more diverse than is sometimes thought.

www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-51385884

ME ME MEMES

Anyone who spends more than a few minutes on social media will have come across memes offering generally well meant advice on looking after yourself when going through tough times.

The wording varies, but the message is the same: Be Positive. The implication is often that if you're not feeling positive, if the Black Dog has descended, it must be your own fault. In many ways they are 21st century versions of the old cliché "Pull yourself together", except they lack the honesty of that cliché. Instead they hide this message in nice sounding words set against pleasing-on-the-eye backgrounds. They are at best trite, and can be downright dangerous.

8 Things to Remember When Going Through Tough Times is one such meme that can be found on social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Pinterest, YouTube and others, as well as personal blogs, so-called 'motivational' sites and elsewhere, including LGBT+ sites. Let's look at the 8 Things in more detail.

1. *Everything can and will change.*

This is really just a variant of "things will get better". Saying such things to someone grieving the loss of a loved one is unlikely to make them feel better, nor is it likely to help someone with depression or anxiety. It trivialises their grief or depression, and sometimes it isn't even true. That loved spouse or partner or parent or child is not coming back from the grave, and that will never change no matter how long we live.

2. *You've overcome challenges before.*

So what? Each challenge is different. Previous challenges may help us cope with a current one, but each challenge – whether a bereavement or episode of depression or the loss of a job or a house repossession or a burglary – is different. Knowing we've coped in the past doesn't mean we will cope with the latest setback. Indeed, sometimes it can be the smallest thing that finally gets to us, and that 'final straw' could be some well-meaning person telling us we've overcome challenges before.

3. *It's a learning experience.*

If someone said this to me when I was facing grief or homelessness or anxiety I would probably swear at them and if they were in my home tell them to leave. On one level, the whole of life is a 'learning experience', but calling our pain a 'learning experience' trivialises that pain.

4. *Not getting what you want can be a blessing.*

In what universe is it okay or helpful to say this to someone in pain? In what way can it ever be a blessing not to get one's loved one back or not to get a cure for one's cancer or not getting that motorised wheelchair that helps one have a degree of independence? Clearly, we all have to cope with what life throws at us, but finding out the chemotherapy we or our loved ones have gone through hasn't worked is hardly a blessing.

5. *Allow yourself to have some fun.*

Why? If someone has lost their life partner, the person with whom they shared everything, the last thing they'll be thinking about is having "fun". In any case, activities that used to be fun when shared may no longer be so. If someone is going through a period of depression or anxiety, it may be that nothing is fun.

6. *Being kind to yourself is the best medicine.*

This one is potentially dangerous. Many of us have to take medication on a daily basis to keep us relatively pain free and mobile, some people need medication because of mental health issues and yet others would die without medication. These aren't luxuries. I'm not even sure what "being kind to yourself" means. If people are persuaded to stop taking prescribed medications and replace them with internet memes, they are likely to get a shock.

7. *Other people's negativity isn't worth worrying about.*

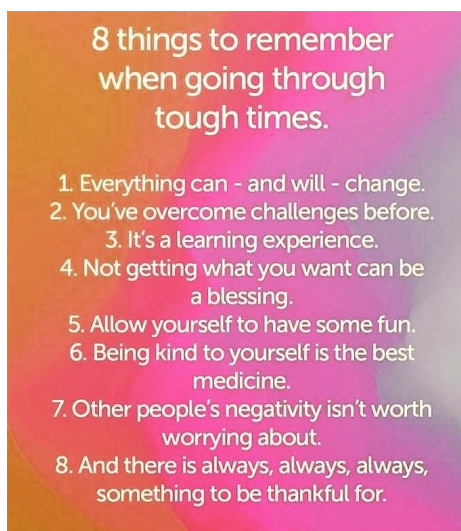
What if that negativity manifests itself in homophobic or transphobic or racist abuse? What if that negativity results in us being turned away from a restaurant or a shop or a train? What if that negativity comes from a religious cleric who won't allow us to have the readings we want at a loved one's funeral? This is just a 21st century way of saying: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." As many LGBT+ people know from personal experience, names can hurt us and damage us and unless we acknowledge that we may become part of the problem.

8. *And there is always, always, always something to be thankful for.*

Is there? Perhaps. But saying this to someone in pain – whether that pain is physical, mental or emotional – is hardly helpful. Try saying this to someone who's lost their job and as a result can't keep up the rent or mortgage payments so ends up homeless with their children taken into care. And then duck, before their fist smashes into your face. I can't think of any situation in which it would be appropriate to say this to someone in pain. It is really just a less honest way of saying "pull yourself together".

There are many examples of equally appalling memes. Those who post such stuff may feel a warm glow, however the warm glow doesn't come from helping others. In effect they are saying: "Look at me, aren't I doing good? Aren't I showing empathy?". It is virtue signalling at its worst and of little or no use to those in pain.

If you do find yourself wanting to reach out for support – and we all do at times – our [Contacts page](#) offers trusted resources for LGBT+ Highlands and Islands people. These you will most likely find far more useful than what is offered by *8 Things to Remember When Going Through Tough Times*.



Contacts

To access a contact's website just click on the relevant entry

UnDividingLines website: www.undividinglines.wordpress.com

UnDividingLines on Facebook: www.facebook.com/UnDividingLines

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| Affirmation Scotland | Church of Scotland LGBT group |
| BiScotland | Scottish bisexual group |
| Broken Rainbow | LGBT domestic violence help |
| Equality Network | Scottish LGBT equality and human rights |
| Gay Men's Health | Scottish advice on gay men's health |
| Hate Free Highland | Hate crime website |
| Highland Hearts | Group for LGBTI women in the Inverness area |
| Highland LGBT Forum | Forum for all LGBT Highlanders and visitors |
| Highland LGBT Writers' Group | LGBT writers' group |
| Highland Sexual Health | NHS Sexual Health services |
| HIV Scotland | Scottish HIV policies and information |
| Lesbian Scotland | Scottish Lesbian groups and contacts |
| LGBT Domestic Abuse | Scottish LGBT domestic abuse support |
| LGBT Helpline Scotland | LGBT information and support line |
| LGBT History Month Scotland | Celebrating Scottish LGBT lives |
| LGBT Humanists | LGBT Humanist group |
| LGBT Western Isles | LGBT Western Isles group |
| LGBT Youth Scotland | LGBT youth advice, support and contacts |
| Moray LGBT Group | LGBT Moray group |
| NetworQ Orkney | LGBT Orkney group |
| OneBodyOneFaith | LGBT Christian group |
| Our Story Scotland | Archiving Scottish LGBT experiences |
| Out and About North Scotland | LGBTQIA+ social group for the Aberdeenshire to Inverness area |
| Parents Enquiry | Help for parents of LGBT people |
| Pink Saltire | Scottish LGBT news and community projects |
| Pillar | LGBT Youth (13-25) group |
| Quest | LGBT Catholic group |
| Rape and Sexual Abuse Service | Highland-based help for victims of sexual violence |
| ScotsGay | Scottish LGBT magazine |
| Shetland LGBT Group | LGBT Shetland group |
| Speak Out Scotland | Help for men who have suffered male sexual abuse |
| Stonewall Scotland | LGBT equality organisation |
| Swans Scotland | Trans advice, support and contacts |
| Terrence Higgins Trust | The UK's largest HIV information, advice and support service |
| Waverley Care Highland | Scottish HIV and Hep C co-infection information and advice |

If anyone would like details added to, removed from, or updated in this list, please contact us at undividinglines@mail.com

