Chapter One:

‘He was always telling me stories’

When Christopher Isherwood was taken to meet Swami Prabhavananda for the first time by Gerald Heard in 1939 little did either of the two expatriate Englishmen know that they were in some sense continuing something that was started by the parents of the hitherto-atheist novelist as far back as the previous century. It is extraordinary that while much has been written, and continues to be written, about Isherwood’s Vedantism, what is almost always overlooked is that his interest may well have been atavistic. While Isherwood was aware of his father’s artistic talents or his letter-writing skills as early as 1922, he was pleasantly surprised to find, during his reading of his parents’ diaries and letters in 1966, that father Frank Isherwood was interested in Buddhism and Theosophy. He wrote about this too. But he never acknowledged his mother’s interest in India. What is even more surprising is that Kathleen Isherwood herself never appears to have spoken about it to her Vedantist son. However, since, during the research for his book Kathleen and Frank (1971) Isherwood had read all of Kathleen’s extant diaries, there can be no doubt that he knew about his mother’s interests. No mention is made of this either in the aforementioned book or in Isherwood’s account of his becoming a Vedantist, My Guru and his Disciple (1980). This chapter seeks to discuss Kathleen Isherwood’s interest in India and in things Indian and to show that even when Isherwood became a Vedantist he was being very much the son of Kathleen and Frank.
Kathleen’s interest in the Orient in general and India in particular may have stemmed primarily from the correspondence that she had with Frank both before and after their marriage. The first time that India appears in the correspondence is in Frank’s letter of 16 November 1899. ‘Living is so cheap,’ he writes, ‘when one gets to India.’ He actually meets Indians two months later in South Africa. In a letter dated 6 January 1900 he writes, ‘We had lunch at the hotel where we were waited upon by the most delightful dignified Hindoos in white clothes and jewelled pink sashes. You see a lot of them about the streets, also kaffirs, which all give the place a thoroughly foreign feeling’ (FIL 59).

‘I love the advertisements in the papers,’ he writes in a letter dated 23 April 1900, ‘particularly the shipping ones. Now one is out in the world, so to speak, one feels it so much more probable that one will go some day to India, China, Japan etc’(FIL 68). He writes from the Marine Hotel, Durban on 13 March 1901, ‘I think on the whole it is more foreign looking than Capetown as there are so many Indians about...’(FIL 113). But soon these casual observations are succeeded by serious pondering. In a letter sent off on 22 July 1901 he declares, ‘Japan is after all the country of my heart, and I want to give you also the fever of it. I was thinking to myself the other day what would an ordinary person - that awful ordinary person one sees so much of - say if one said “I am feeling homesick today, I know the bluebells are out at home.” The Japanese person would understand though. The peasants instead of staring stupidly when they saw you admiring the beauties of nature, hastened to show you something yet more beautiful - a better point of view’ (FIL 132). What needs to be noted here is that Frank’s interest in the Orient is also tied to his well-developed aesthetic sense. The other aspect of Frank’s interest that needs to be noted is that at this point he seems to be regarding the Orient as a homogenous exotic
cultural site. While he may be accused of being essentialist, even Orientalist, such an accusation may be inaccurate because Orientalism has a poorly hidden but extremely active racist, colonialist agenda. In Frank’s interest no such agenda can be discerned. It is, at this point, an interest in an inaccessible culture without any desire to prove the superiority of British culture by contrast. In fact, he gestures towards the inferiority of his own culture and its aesthetic callousness when he speaks of the ‘awful ordinary person.’

In her diary entry of 23 November 1901, Kathleen records, ‘Began *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling, delightfully glamorous pictures of India, the wanderings of an old Buddhist and a little boy’ (FIL 143). It is extraordinary that a week later she should receive a letter from Frank dated 8 November in which he writes, ‘I was feeling quite out of tune with anything European, with a very bad attack of Native India on me, produced by reading *Kim* (was there ever such a badly named book?) Have you read it?’ He writes some more about the book before despairing of his chances of seeing the India that Kipling shows in the book. He says, ‘You and I will never be able to see that native life, (Anglo-India and polo and pig-sticking I am sure would cut one off most effectually from it) at least not in this world.’ But there is a wish for posthumous travel: ‘Sometimes I think that if I am very good I shall be allowed to wander about as a disembodied spirit and mix in all these delightful companies’ (FIL 143). At that time he was not to know that his son Christopher would have more than one opportunity to ‘mix in all these delightful companies.’ Frank’s brother Henry, however, did go to India, because in a subsequent letter there is mention of an amethyst from the Indian city of Jaipur given to Frank by his brother Henry which Frank wanted to have set in a brooch or a pendant, for Kathleen (21 September 1902; FIL 172). There is also mention of Henry’s reading a book called
Gleanings in Buddha’s Field (12 October 1902; FIL 173). [Here it needs to be mentioned that of all the members of the Isherwood family the one that Christopher most actively cultivated was his uncle Henry. In Christopher and His Kind (1977) Isherwood speaks of the way he suggested to Henry that since the latter had had a broken marriage and was in fact homosexual he should settle an allowance on his dear nephew with whom he shared his sexual nature. Isherwood’s side of the deal would entail regular correspondence from Berlin and lunch with him whenever he was in England. Uncle Henry used these lunches to regale his nephew with tales of his homosexual exploits and idiosyncrasies and would demand to be told about his nephew’s hedonistic life in the gay bars of Berlin. It would be dangerous to categorically rule out the possibility that Henry’s interest in the Orient may not have had any effect, conscious or unconscious, on young adult Christopher. But when speaking of his uncle Henry, Isherwood dwells on his homosexuality and his love of Catholic ritual, but makes no mention of his travels in India and his interest in Buddhism (CK 34-35).]

Buddhism appears again in Frank’s correspondence soon afterwards. ‘I am reading a book on Esoteric Buddhism,’ he writes a month later, ‘which is very interesting but rather difficult to understand. It doesn’t seem to be incompatible with Christianity exactly either.’ In thinking that Buddhism is not incompatible with Christianity Frank is, albeit unconsciously, paying tribute to the fact that Buddhism was born out of a protest against Brahminical Hinduism, and was therefore somewhat similar in its socio-cultural origins to Protestantism in Europe. Also, Frank’s ability to discern a certain compatibility between Buddhism and Christianity further underlines the absence of any racist agenda. Had his motive been colonial and racist, he would have explored ways to establish the
ultimate superiority of Christianity and the incompatible inferiority of any Oriental religion. However he signals a note of skepticism. ‘They go too much into detail altogether to be absolutely believable and profess to know these things as a matter of fact’ (12 November, 1902; FIL 176). A month later he writes of his being impressed ‘very much’ by theosophist books: ‘They seem to give one such a very definite grip of life and the importance of every thought and action in forming one for a future state, and are I don’t think inconsistent with church teaching’ (16 December, 1902; FIL 183). In that same letter he wonders if Kathleen would read the books if he got them for her. He also talks of his fear of Kathleen not being able to share his religious interests once they got married. He need not have worried, because it is evident from Kathleen’s diaries that she did indeed read theosophist books under his influence, and, as we shall see below, even heard a lecture by the theosophist Jiddu Krishnamurti in London. Also, what needs to be noted in the letter quoted above is Frank’s continued desire to render his readings in Indian religions compatible with his native Christianity.

Kathleen Machell Smith and Frank Bradshaw Isherwood married on 12 March 1903 and on 26 August the following year Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood was born. Considering that Japan was self-confessedly the country of Frank’s heart it can hardly be surprising that Kathleen should write in her journal of 27 August that the baby had ‘amusing long slitty eyes like a Japanese baby’ (FIL 213). Theosophy as a subject, continued to crop up between Kathleen and Frank. Even a year later she wrote in her journal about sitting in the garden in the evening with Frank and talking theosophy (9
July 1905; FIL 223). So Frank’s fears that his wife would not be able to share his interest in Indian religions proved to be unfounded.

If Frank had indeed given Kathleen the fever of his love of the Orient he had obviously not done too badly, because in her journal’s page for 8 July 1910 appears the following entry about a visit to the British Museum to see an ‘Exhibition of Chinese and Japanese paintings 4th to 19th centuries in the print room.’ Although initially not impressed, ‘before the end we were wildly enthusiastic, the line, the colour, the design, the wonderful detail, the atmosphere, the impressionist effects are amazing, quite a revelation, and after two hours I longed to go and begin again!’ (FIL 295-6) As has been noted about Frank’s interest in the Orient, Kathleen’s interest was also one that was primarily of an artistic, aesthetic nature. Since both of them enjoyed expressing themselves through drawing and watercolour, as we shall see, countries such as India, Japan and China were primarily of aesthetic interest. However, to this interest is added the interest in Indian religions.

Kathleen’s interest in other faiths was piqued by an article in a journal possibly titled *Fortnightly* in its June 1911 issue. In it one E.S. Stevens wrote about the Bahai faith. Kathleen wrote in her diary what she considered to be the gist of the article and concluded, ‘Sooner or later it [the Bahai faith] must become an important factor in the politics of the Near East.’

The tranquility of Kathleen’s married life was destroyed four years later by the death of Frank in action at Ypres. Although he had been killed on 9 May the death was not officially confirmed until 24 June 1915. It is interesting, at this point, to consider an entry from her diary. Written four years earlier, on 19 June 1911, it reads, ‘They [the
Eardley Wilmots] were going...to see the Indian camp at Hampton Court where the
Indians who have come over here for the Coronation have encamped.’ This entry is an
indication of a remarkable phenomenon in Kathleen’s life. Just as Frank was responsible
for her Oriental interests, in his absence there would be others to sustain that interest. The
Coronation being referred to was of King George V and Queen Mary. In the history of the
British empire, they remain the only reigning couple to have visited India as Emperor and
his Consort. They also visited Calcutta for a few days in the winter of 1911, the city that
Isherwood would visit twice a few decades later.

Perhaps the most important person in Kathleen’s circle to be interested in India
was Mrs. Madgie Reid. Mrs. Reid was the niece of Frank’s mother Elizabeth, and thus
Frank’s first cousin. Isherwood introduces her in Kathleen and Frank while narrating the
events surrounding his father’s death. ‘Jack Reid, her son,’ writes Isherwood, ‘had joined
the Regiment [York and Lancaster, the one to which Frank belonged] at Limerick and had
been with Frank in the Armentieres sector. Thus Madgie and Kathleen were drawn
together by shared anxiety. Madgie now became Kathleen’s most devoted friend and
helper in her time of trouble’ (KF 463). What Isherwood does not mention is the role
Madgie played in introducing her widowed friend to new society and broadening her
outlook. After Frank’s death Kathleen and Madgie often went shopping and had tea
together. Kathleen was by Madgie’s side when in March 1916 her son Jack Reid’s leg
had to be amputated. But Madgie’s friendship with Kathleen also extended to the latter’s
son Christopher. There is, for example, this entry in Kathleen’s journal on 20 September
1917: ‘C [Christopher] had bath and after early dinner Madgie called & took him to see
Madgie’s influence on Kathleen becomes apparent from 21 December 1923 when Kathleen goes to Hotel Cecil to a party with her. It was being held by the British Indian Union with the ostensible purpose of being sociable to the Indians in England. ‘A very good tea,’ Kathleen noted in her diary, ‘& entertainment of singing & dancing.’

This was not the first time that Kathleen was seeing Indians in person. As far back as 1893 she wrote in her journal about watching an Oxford-Cambridge cricket match. ‘Much struck by the funny little black who plays for Cambridge (Ranjitsinhji [sic])’ (4 July 1893; FIL 9). Thirty-three years later, in 1926, she wrote on 6 July, ‘Lunched 12:45 with the Greenway[s], who kindly took me to the Oxford & Cambridge cricket match ... I was much interested to see K.S. Duleepsinhji[sic] play. [N]ephew of the famous Ranghi [sic] & a promising bat.’ Three years later, on 9 July 1929, when Kathleen went to Maud Greenway’s, she, Maud and Cleveland went in their car to watch the Oxford-Cambridge match at Lord’s. She noted in her diary: ‘Oxford scored much more slowly but the Nawab of Pataudi hit some good boundary balls & the score was creeping up & would save a follow on.’ So, she was accustomed to watching Indian men play cricket. Therefore, what may be said with certainty is that Indians were much a part of Kathleen’s visual field and society, even though she did not belong to a family of either Indologists or had close family members deeply associated with Indians.

Thanks to Madgie’s efforts to involve Kathleen in her parties, the lady also saw Indians who did not play cricket. If on one day – 2 January 1924 – she met a young Indian bride and bridegroom from Columbo who had been educated in England - ‘the bride very picturesque in rose-coloured sari’ – on another – 23 July 1925 – she would meet an Indian doctor. ‘Back to tea in Alfred Place - Mamie Tristram there [more about
her later] & Ella & an Indian lady,’ she wrote on 1 October 1925. 12 August 1926: ‘[Miss Green and Epstein Bird] joined me at tea at Madgies [sic] who had a little Indian lady there.’ 30 November 1926: ‘In the evening to a party at Madgie’s 8.30 an Indian Dr. came over to study Psychology in everyday life - Two other Indian men & Mr. Way & Ella & the two Miss Kennards there. [L]iked the Indian doctor. [H]e was so serious & unselfconscious.’ 24 July 1927: ‘To tea with Madgie, the Luces. 3 little Indian girls like a gay bunch of flowers in natural dress.’ There were occasions when she met Indians in presence of ladies other than Madgie Reid. 1 March 1935: ‘In the afternoon to see Katie & we sat with our needlework - till 5, then a new admirer a little Indian Parsee Dr. arrived to call & see her thing’s [sic] - he is a collector himself & very pressing she should go & see his thing’s [sic].’ At the risk of appearing repetitive these entries from Kathleen’s diaries need to be cited in order to emphasize on the frequency with which she came in contact with Indians. While her interests in China and Japan may not have entirely disappeared, there appears to have been a greater preponderance of India and Indians in her life after the death of Frank.

But the most important Indian that Kathleen met due to association with her Indophiliac relatives was, amazingly enough, one her son would meet twelve years later. On 6 November 1927 Kathleen read some talks of J. Krishnamurti given that summer in Holland. ‘He claims to be a new reincarnation of the world’s great Teacher’s [sic] including Christ...there is a great deal about Truth & beauty & Happiness in finding it as Each man can within himself….’ Although she ended her entry by wondering if all this was not too selfish, the fact remains that she was acquainted with Jiddu Krishnamurti’s
writings when the time came for her to hear him speak in person. On 6 January 1928 she
and her younger son Richard went to tea with Mamie Tristram. Leonard Tristram,
Mamie’s son, was there, staying for three nights. He is earlier mentioned in Kathleen’s
diary on 25 June 1923. ‘Leonard is going to India via Egypt in September & has now left
Cambridge having abandoned the idea of staying on there for two years.’ In January 1928
he was over from Holland where he then lived at the eighteenth-century Castle Airdar
with other members of the Order of the Star in the East. It was the headquarters from
where Krishnamurti’s talks were published and sent out. ‘Krishnamurti himself away in
India just now - camps arranged there & in California & Holland,’ she wrote in her
journal. On 31 March she went to ‘Dalmeny Mansion[s] where Madgie & Jack Reid &
Leonard Tristram went to the Friend’s Home opposite Euston station where Krishnamurti
was giving an address.’ She recorded the ‘masses of people waiting for doors to open -
we got in but the whole place was packed - every gangway & every seat. [T]he doors had
to be closed & even on the roof were people listening through the open skylights.’ She
noted his physical appearance: ‘young & slim & dark black hair brilliant eyes & thick
lashes.’ She noted down the gist of his speech: ‘harmony & truth which brings liberation
& happiness no outward form’s [sic] or ceremonies or churches to be founded - happiness
is within ourselves.’ She noted his manner of speaking: ‘[h]e spoke with absolute
confidence & without hesitation or notes - everyone listened with absolute silence and
attention.’ The fact that this was a significant event in her life can be surmised from the
amount of care she took to put down in her diary as much about the occasion as she could
remember. Although she did not say so in her diary, she could very well have thought of
her dead husband fondly as she listened to Krishnamurti because she was acutely aware of how interested Frank would be to hear the theosophist.

Two days later Kathleen went with Mamie Tristram ‘to Waterloo to see Leonard off. [H]e & the prophet Krishnamurti & other disciples Mamie was introduced & thought his manner & almost child[-]like simplicity most endearing attractive & she felt happy at Leonard going off with him to California’ (my emphasis). The phrase ‘child-like’ needs to be taken special note of. It is the element of the ‘child-like’ that is organic to the way in which Isherwood frequently described his fictional and non-fictional characters. As we shall see in the subsequent chapters, he detects the child in almost every adult he writes about. It would not be difficult to trace this Isherwoodian penchant for detecting the child in the adult back to Kathleen Isherwood. If she can find a ‘prophet’ child-like then she may not be doing so as a patronizing Orientalist act of invoking the Manichean binary of the adult colonizer and the child colonized. It is obvious that she regards Krishnamurti with great respect. While she attributes this detection of the ‘child-like’ in Krishnamurti to Mamie, there is no reason to believe that she disagreed with the detection. She finds in his ‘child-like simplicity’ perhaps as an outward manifestation of his spiritual eminence. It is interesting that her son Christopher would easily detect the child-like in Ramakrishna too when he would start to research the 19th-century mystic’s life and character.

Sixteen years later, on 11 May 1944, Kathleen’s elder son Christopher would be attending his first Krishnamurti lecture, after having first met him at a picnic in November 1939. It is intriguing therefore that Kathleen writes of her son’s meeting Krishnamurti without even adding a mention that she too had met the Indian philosopher over a decade ago. There is, however, reason to believe that Isherwood knew that
Krishnamurti was not unknown to Kathleen. Now that Isherwood’s side of the correspondence between him and Kathleen is in a published volume, it is obvious that Isherwood was aware of Leonard Tristram’s association with Krishnamurti and therefore through Leonard and his mother, Kathleen’s own knowledge of the theosophist. He writes in his letter of 27 November 1939, ‘I asked him about Leonard’ (Colletta, 157-158). So there is no reason to believe that Isherwood never knew. Besides, Isherwood was living with his mother at the time that Krishnamurti was in London. The fact remains that this important piece of information is not incorporated in *Kathleen and Frank*.

British Indian Union was not the only organisation of its kind with which Madgie Reid was involved. We learn from Kathleen’s journal entry of 17 June 1926 that that day she sat in on one of the drawing room meetings held at the Reids’ house for the Indian Medical Mission. ‘Interesting meeting,’ she noted in the diary. On 19 April 1929 Madgie invited her and some other friends to a lecture by Sir William Joynson-Hicks, Miss Maitland of Kasur and Miss M. Warburton-Booth of Gurakhpur, the latter two being missionaries. Madgie Reid’s acquainting of Kathleen to India also included gastronomy, as when on 14 December, 1935 they had ‘Christmas’ lunch ‘at the Indian restaurant in Glendower Place - They go on for a great variety of curries - very hot but very good...’ The taste for Indian food never really left her. As late as 29 October 1948, we find her trying out the recipe of green tomato chutney taken down from the BBC radio programme *Woman’s Hour*. 
Information about India not only came from people but sometimes also from letters that Madgie read out to her. Jack Reid went on a trip to India on 6 August, 1936. On 29 September Kathleen wrote in her journal, ‘Richard & I to Madgie’s at 4 … & she read aloud an amusing letter from Jack from India where he has been on holiday.’ Jack Reid returned to England in October. [Here one should perhaps mention the fact that Isherwood himself had a chance to meet Indians too on one occasion. This was in early November 1937 during his stay in Cambridge when he gave two lectures. One of which, Kathleen meticulously notes, was to Indians. Isherwood’s impression of the audience is not on record.] Although, as time went by other things took over her life - namely her elder son’s career as a famous writer - Kathleen stayed friends with Madgie, if no longer a frequent companion to Indian exhibitions, lectures and parties.

Madgie Reid may have been the most influential person in Kathleen’s circle, after Frank, when it came to sustaining her interest in India, but she was not the only one. On 2 June 1938 Kathleen wrote, ‘To tea at 4 pm with Madgie who had a party at 34 Stanhope Gardens. Ella Luce there, Miss McMahon, an Indian lady, Mrs [illegible word].’ Of all the names mentioned in the entry I would want to focus attention on ‘Ella Luce.’ The name ‘Luce’ leads one to conjecture that she, like Madgie Reid, may have been a cousin of Frank’s. Kathleen’s friendship with Ella may have gone as far back as that with Madgie. Ella ran an orphanage in India. The first time that Kathleen was given any idea of the orphanage was when she was shown pictures of it on 16 March 1925. There were subsequent occasions on which Ella told her about her time in India. She ran the orphanage probably for four years. On 4 January 1930 Kathleen met her again, a day after Ella’s return to England. On this occasion she also met one of Ella’s former pupils,
a young Indian woman. Ella Luce ultimately published a book about her experiences in India in early 1933, called *Glimpses of Christian India*. While Ella Luce was obviously one of many hundreds of Christian missionaries who pursued a policy of overt social service and covert conversion in India, there is no reason to believe that Kathleen supported such activities. At no point in her diaries does she support evangelicalism, conversion, and other such ways in which some Christians often sought in those days to colonise the ‘pagan heathens’.

Besides Madgie Reid, Ella Luce, Mamie and Leonard Tristram there were others Kathleen frequently met who either had relatives in India or were going there or had been there. There was Mr. Mylrea who was at Cambridge with his brother the same time that Frank and brother Henry were. He came to tea on 23 December 1919 and talked about India and his life there. There was a certain Harry who ‘told some amusing stories of India’ on New Year’s Day 1927. On 23 March 1927 - four days before the Krishnamurti lecture - Kathleen ‘dined with the Barrells - Betty Chapter … & her second brother having only just returned from a long tour of Ceylon India Malay etc...’ Arthur Luce, probably husband of Mary Luce, started for India on 23 November 1928 intending to stay there for five years. [However he had to be operated on in Lucknow for appendicitis on 7 April the following year and died soon after the procedure.] On 9 August 1929 she wrote: ‘Aggie & I in the evening to hear an organ recital in the Parish church picking up Mrs. Harris on the way...she finally departs on Monday & expects they will go back to India in autumn.’ On 24 September 1933 she recorded: ‘S came in later, & wanted us to go back to tea to meet Mrs. Evelyn Smythes...The E.S’s are living out in India...’ In
November 1933 Isherwood had a young man named Herky Ross come over daily and type for him. On 12 February 1934 Kathleen and Marjorie Ross, Herky Ross’s mother, went to the House of Commons and sat in the Ladies’ Gallery. The tickets of admission had been given to Mrs. Ross by the then-MP from Bristol, Mr. Bernays. He also had Herky as his Secretary. But what interested Kathleen was that the young MP had met Gandhi in India and had written a book about him. There was also the incident of one of her acquaintances, Betty Burra, marrying an Indian whose child the Ms. Burra had been looking after for sometime, as one finds in her entry for 19 September 1941. Then there are miscellaneous entries such as the one for 28 June 1945: ‘I went to see Mrs. Budenburg for half an hour in Arkwright Rd. [S]he had a wonderfully embroidered Indian bedspread to show me, once at Marple Hall...’

One of the ways in which Kathleen attempted to get on with her life after Frank’s death was to go out to museums, galleries, the library and the theatre as much as she could. It is therefore interesting to learn about the books she read and the plays, exhibitions, lectures and film-shows she chose to go to. It is striking that of all the theatres that were staging plays on 14 November 1919 she should choose to go to the Winter Garden Theatre. She writes of ‘an Indian play there performed by the Indian Society which aims at joining East & West ... a play written 1500 years ago! by the Indian Shakespeare of that time. It was of course performed in English.’ On top of the page in the journal she writes ‘Sakuntala’ which is undoubtedly the name of the play performed, written originally in Sanskrit by the poet Kalidasa. One must remember that at this time Frank had been dead for four years. If she so chose she could have buried with Frank her
apparently casual interest in India. The fact is that she did not. It could very well have been the case that through her interest in India she was, in some way, consolidating a connection with Frank. It could be that India in particular, and the East in general, had come to be associated in her mind with Frank and therefore loving India was loving Frank too.

On 14 February 1922 Kathleen went to Richard’s school - Norland Place School - and saw the upper Fourth which was Richard’s class. Parents were being allowed into the classes that day because it was Visitors’ Day. She was in time for ‘a most interesting lecture - a journey to India & the places one could pass and see, they are by degrees following in the footsteps of the Prince of Wales Tour.’

As has been mentioned before, Kathleen’s interest in India was primarily of an artistic nature. Fortunately for her, there were frequent exhibitions of Indian art that she could go to. For instance, on 30 March 1922, she, her younger son Richard and a certain Elizabeth Burrell went to see ‘some very clever watercolours of Persia - (Shivaz in particular) & India (Srinagar, Kashmir) by Capt. D.N. Morgan R.A....’ On 24 April 1923, ‘Raymond S.’ took her to a ‘delightfully illustrated tour through India most [double underline] interesting - most of it coloured.’ She went to the Great Exhibition on its opening day, 23 April 1924 and was disappointed that ‘India was hardly finished...’ It was with the same ‘Raymond S’ that she went to watch ‘several Indian plays acted by the society of the Union of East & West...’ on 24 July. On 26 August, she ‘went to see the Pageant at Wembley’ and made it a point to note that the India episode of the pageant ‘was very picturesque & full of colours.’ So, her enjoyment of India remains primarily an aesthetic one. On 22 October she went to see ‘some large Spencer Pryce coloured
lithographs done for poster for the British Empire Exhibition & rejected by them on political grounds … one of the Indian Frontier man in turban on horseback Especially fine…” (On 20 July next year, 1925, Kathleen went back for another look at the lithographs and bought one depicting the Indian Frontier which Mamie also seems to have liked. Five days later the framed lithograph was hanging at 36, St. Mary Abbot’s Terrace, Kathleen’s London address since March, 1921.) She saw ‘wonderful Oriental Manuscripts’ on 9 July 1927 at ‘Mr. Chester Beatty’s home in Kensington Palace [Gardens] and went on to record details such as ‘the earliest parchment thick & square, but from 1252 to 1517 the graceful Naskhi characters were used. In the reign of the Emperor Akbar in India 1542-1605c. [illegible word, most probably ‘contemporary’] with Elizabeth.’ She goes on to remark, ‘fine & beautiful pictures were painted as Akbar had no prejudices of Faith in encouraging artists to do figures & animals.’ As has been noted before, it is the aesthetic aspect on India that held the greatest fascination for the artist Kathleen.

Two years later, in the summer of 1929, Kathleen, her mother Emily and younger son Richard moved southward across the Kensington High Street, to 19 Pembroke Gardens. What is interesting is that Kathleen was leaving a neighbourhood which included a house that would have appealed to her Oriental interests. A short distance due east down Holland Park Road was, and still is, the extraordinary Leighton House. Home of the classical painter Frederic, Lord Leighton, it was converted into a museum soon after his death in 1896. As the pamphlet available at the museum states, ‘The Arab Hall is the centrepiece of Leighton House, evoking the world of the Arabian Nights. The dazzling gilt mosaic frieze … the calming murmur of the fountain in the centre of the
Arab Hall, and the intricate designs of the Isnik tiles, all contribute to an extraordinary vision of the Orient.’ There is, however, no mention of this museum in any of Kathleen’s journals and is no longer possible to ascertain if she was aware of this museum.

Similarly, there is no reason to suppose that she was not.

On 17 November 1937 she took a bus to Piccadilly ‘to hear Ella Maillart lecture, she & Peter Fleming travelled from China to India by Tibet a six months journey & most uncomfortable but then as she said how much you enjoyed bread & butter afterwards if you had been living on dried fish!’ Then she notes down the contents of the lecture in some detail.

When Kathleen went to the cinema with Mamie Tristram, Ella Luce or Madgie Reid the subject of the film was more likely than not to be Indian, such as the one they saw on 14 June 1926: *Life of Buddha*. She notes, ‘[I]t was filmed in India with Indians & was very interesting indeed.’

On 16 May 1930 she went to see ‘The Green Goddess with Michael Arliss. [E]xtraordinarily good a talky but so clear & he as the Rajah very good indeed...’ Often documentaries on India would accompany lectures, such as the one she attended by herself on 10 October 1933 at the Holy Trinity, Brompton and on 13 February 1938 at the Group Theatre Rooms, Great Newport Street. On the latter occasion John Grierson lectured on making documentary films. Among other things he spoke of ‘how he went to India to make shots of the Elephant Boy!’ But one of the films set in India that made the most impression on her seems to have been *Clive of India*. She saw it thrice: on 15 May 1934, 16 April 1935 and 13 September of the same year. In the meantime, on 26 August she and Madgie Reid caught a lecture on Robert Clive at the National Portrait
Another film with an Indian subject matter that Kathleen repeatedly saw was The Lives of a Bengal Lancer. She saw the film first on 8 March 1934: ‘…photographed (at record expense) out in the N.W.[North West] frontier in India, most beautiful riding, & very wild scenery & very interesting & most exciting too.’ She went to see it again on 15 June 1935.

In the post-Frank years her reading would include a small but significant amount of books either about or set in India. On 26 November 1919, for example, we find her reading aloud from a book named The Star of India. She not only read the book herself but read it aloud to her mother, Emily. In July 1923 Kathleen read a book called Ann’s an Idiot by one Pamela Wynne. ‘..Enjoyed it immensely’(4 July) and ‘felt quite lost & dull I liked her & her adventures in India so much’(5 July). On 8 December 1926 she wrote, ‘Read Penelope Finds Out by Pamela Wynne, all her [illegible word, probably ‘stories’] are variations of ‘Ann’s an Idiot’ which was very good.’ In 1937 – as we learn from an entry dated 24 October – she read the third volume of Two Noble Lives, a book about Lady Canning and her sister Lady Waterford who were in India during the Mutiny [which had taken place in India eighty years previously]. It is amazing that her son would continue, and not start, as he may have thought, her reading of material of an Indian nature when he started to write on Vedanta in 1943. She received the first issue of Isherwood-edited Vedanta and the West on 19 March 1943 and copied a lengthy 228-word extract on ‘Yoga’ in one of her Cash Account pages in the back of the diary, referenced as 24 March 1943 and then ‘M. R-G.’ On 10 November 1944 she wrote: ‘Christopher’s translation of Prose and Poetry of the Bhagavad-Gita ‘the Song of God’
arrived at last yesterday it was sent off Sept 2... it is most interesting & attractive...’ The next day she noted: ‘“The Vedanta” for September-October came, a very interesting article in it by Christopher “The Gita and War” which also is like a preface to the Gita “the Song of God” which arrived yesterday...I am delighted with it as far as I have got. [I]t needs careful reading.....’ 8 About his visit to Wybersleigh from 25 January to 28 February 1947 Isherwood remembered in 1971 that Kathleen ‘was even prepared to be interested in Vedanta…the Swami she regarded with respect’ (LY 89). What he neglects to mention is that respecting spiritual leaders from India was not new to Kathleen. She may have said in 1947 that she regarded the Swami with respect, but that respect had a history which could be traced back to at least two decades. Isherwood does not consider it necessary to trace the significant history of her reading theosophist books and hearing Jiddu Krishnamurti. So, considering the fact that she had already been exposed to the writings of Jiddu Krishnamurti and indeed to the Vedantic writings in the journals sent to her by her son from California it seems an understatement to say that she was prepared to be interested in Vedanta. There is nothing in Isherwood’s writings to suggest that he was aware of the fact that his mother’s exposure to Indian philosophical thought predated his own exposure by twelve years at least. But it is equally unlikely that he was unaware of this fact.

Kathleen was always a keen listener to the wireless. But her radio listening increased when she moved from London to Cheshire in the summer of 1941. Being away at Wybersleigh Hall limited the number of her excursions to attend lectures, film shows, plays and exhibitions. The radio became her window to the outside world. It is
interesting that her exposure to matters Indian continued even through the radio, as on 27 January 1946 when ‘E.M. Forster gave a very nice talk on India which he revisited after 25 years last October this time going by air which only took two days - he noted the changes.’ On 3 February she listened to E.M. Forster as he gave his second talk on ‘India after 25 years’ and noted ‘interesting, & so well written - though of course delivered verbally - !’

India had by then become a major political problem and was in fact just one and a half years away from Independence. On 24 April 1923 she heard a lecture by Lowell Thomas. This was possibly the first time that Kathleen had heard India being discussed as a political problem. Over the next few years she repeatedly found herself listening to discussions of the like nature. As on 6 May 1930: ‘I met Katie at the quarters of the Ladies Junior Carlton... Sir Michael O’Dwyer gave a very interesting [talk] on India, showing how hopeless at present stage it would be to hand over the rule of India to the Indians, with so many opposing religious sects etc. [I]t would mean revolution against each other & all the good of the British Rule to [be] done away with.’ Ten years later, on 14 March 1940, she heard on the radio of the assassination of Sir O’Dwyer by an Indian gunman when the former was at a meeting of the East India Association at Caxton Hall. Kathleen noted in her journal that Sir Michael was the ‘Lt. Governor in India at the time of the Amritsar affair’ & came in for adverse criticism at the time...’ When Kathleen noted these events in her diary, very often she assumed the role of a reporter. She merely reported. She avoided giving her own opinion in the matter. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that she supported the Indian freedom struggle or that she was a
strident anti-imperialist. She was politically conservative, as could be expected of someone of her social status. That should not be surprising. What may be regarded as surprising is that in spite of her conservative political orientation, which was the default political orientation of most people in those days, she maintained a more-than-patronising interest in India and evidently regarded Indian arts and spirituality with admiration and respect.

By 1942 the question of Indian independence had become a pressing one for the British Government and Kathleen recorded in her tiny diaries the hectic diplomatic activity that got underway. On 12 March 1942 she recorded Sir Stafford Cripps’ departure on a mission to India; on 8 April, updates of negotiations with the Indian side; on 7 and 8 August, Gandhi ‘causing trouble in India’ and on 10 August, news of his arrest. In 1943 Gandhi continued to make appearances in Kathleen’s journals, with detailed accounts of his fasts, recorded on 24 and 25 February; Churchill’s response to Indian leaders’ request for Gandhi’s release noted on 25 February; and the appointment of Sir Wavell as the new Viceroy of India written down on 19 June. On 17 May 1946 Kathleen wrote, ‘New plans have been issued by this government for the self-government of India, but it seems unlikely that Hindoos & Moslems will ever agree or work together…’ By December that year Kathleen was recording the events of the Indian conference in England where four Indian leaders took part. On 13 December she observes, ‘…affairs in India seem most unsatisfactory, & no satisfactory solution found - Churchill very grim & gloomy over it - Indeed there is no very cheering news anywhere…’ She underlines the momentous news of 20 February 1947 thus: ‘…it was
announced in the House that India is to be handed over into responsible Indian hands -
Lord Mountbatten is to have the task of the transference & organising the departure of the
British who have ruled India since 1600.’

She continues, ‘Viscount Wavell the present
Viceroy has been dismissed & Lord Louis M. becomes Viceroy - The government think
once the British are out of India that the Moslems & Hindoos will agree!’ On 7 March
1947 she writes about the ‘[v]iolent scenes in Parliament over Indian question’…’
The progress of the Mountbattens was recorded diligently on 11 April and 18 May before the
diary reached the historic 14 August: ‘Warm summer weather continues here & all over
the country - Today Indian (sic) has been given self government but is divided by her own
wish into two Pakistan & India, the Moslems & the Hindoos.’ She also writes, ‘[B]oth
have joined the British Commonwealth but their independence Indian (sic) given back,
seems a great gesture [.]. Lord Mountbatten conducted the proceedings of handing over &
I suppose he will be the Last Viceroy of India - & soon be taking the journey back [.].’

She almost assumes the voice of a political commentator and pronounces, ‘It is greatly to
be hoped India will prove equal to her new responsibilities.’ The narrative continued
onto the next day. ‘Very warm again really wonderful! & most unusual weather here [.].
Yesterday the 14 in the Dominions of India (Hindustan) and Pakistan which represents
the Hindous & the moslems came into being at mid-night (Delhi Time) & British Rule in
the whole of India came to an end after 163 years…’

In subsequent months Kathleen’s journal entries referred to Gandhi’s fasts to stop
communal violence – as on 4 September – and his assassination about five months later,
on Friday, 30 January 1948. ‘On the evening 9 o’clock news came the news of the
assassination of Ghandi [sic] aged 78 - a great loss to India.’ The next day’s accounts were almost entirely devoted to the assassination. What is interesting is that Kathleen does not neglect to mention that ‘he was doubtless a Holy man & an ascetic & did much to improve the conditions of the Untouchables.... & tributes to him came from all over the world - his influence was tremendous ... [H]e was so greatly loved!’ In calling Gandhi a holy man Kathleen Isherwood is continuing to show the respect to Indian spirituality that she began to over twenty years ago. In her mind, Gandhi may well have occupied the same position of respect that she had for Jiddu Krishnamurti and Swami Prabhavananda. She does not hesitate to record the Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee’s hope ‘that though the hand of the murderer has struck him down & the voice which pleaded for peace & brotherhood has been silenced - I am certain his spirit will continue to animate his fellow countrymen & will plead for peace & concord.’ Considering that her elder son had by then been the disciple of an Indian monk for seven years, the only mention he makes of this great Indian tragedy is to write in his travel diary on 31 January that ‘as we rattled over the plain [on their way to Lake Titicaca in South America] we talked of Gandhi’s murder, the Russian crisis and the atomic bomb. Nearly every subject we touched on was sad and depressing in the extreme and yet we were all cheerful’ (CC 149). Isherwood’s casual grouping of ‘Gandhi’s murder’ with other news stories contrasts markedly with his mother’s full-page attention to the assassination and over several days. On 12 February she recorded in her journal the scattering of Gandhi’s ashes in the Ganges. As the year rolled on Kathleen recorded the departure of the Mountbattens from India, the swearing in of the new Governor General C. Rajagopalachari – on 21 and 22
June – and the death of Md. Ali Jinnah in Pakistan on 11 September, which she recorded on 13 September.

By that time relations between Mamie Tristram and Kathleen had become quite frosty. On 8 December, 1940, for example, Kathleen wrote in her journal, ‘Mamie remarked in a letter two days ago “I should not have imagined Christopher’s particular form of literary talents would have commended him to the Quakers! [T]hat body of simple direct, honorable & virtuous people” [...] How can one be friends with anyone who says such insulting things & expects to get away with it - probably thinks it clever - !’

The exact reason for the rift is not apparent from reading the diaries. Kathleen learnt about the death of Ella Luce from a newspaper announcement on 21 January 1943. She was 82. On 12 December, 1950 Kathleen heard that Mrs. Madgie Ried had had a stroke and was unconscious. Two days later she passed away. Kathleen was informed of this by son Jack Ried on 15 December through a postcard. ‘Dear Madge,’ Kathleen wrote that night, ‘she has been such a kind friend ever since I first [illegible word]… in the Frimley days.’

It is interesting that even after Madgie Reid, Mamie Tristram, Ella Luce had all passed away Kathleen kept meeting Indians. The last such turned up at her door on 27 November 1951: ‘Just before lunch a bearded rather portly looking Indian called with a suitcase at the Front door.’ Evidently amused she goes on to write, ‘he said I should live to be ninety [which turned to be true]... & that I was shortly going to receive a telegram from a lady... & there was good luck coming etc. meanwhile unpacking a suitcase with
tins & silk squares & slips [.].’ But she calls a ‘Mrs. Stafford to come & look, & she tactfully got rid of him.’

The last time that we see an entry with an Indian connection is on Friday, 7 February 1958. By that time a certain Miss Anna had taken on the role of Mrs. Reid and Luce and Tristram, thus continuing what had been started by Frank all those years ago. Eighty-nine year-old Kathleen wrote, ‘Miss Ann came around in the morning to say there was rather an interesting programme on the television this evening … Buried Treasures & Sir Mortimer Wheeler on the Greeks in the Himalayas - where the City of TAXILA was the capital of Alexander the Greats [sic] Indian Empire.’ Pages for 15, 16, 18 and 19 March are blank. There are just three lines in the page of 26 April. The next time one reads a day’s account it is for 30 April and the handwriting has changed. On 2 May Kathleen was hospitalised due to stroke and returned home to Wybersleigh a month later. Kathleen did not write her own diary anymore, but dictated it to her younger son Richard. As a result there are no more crosses to indicate ‘and’, no more arbitrary underlining and no more sentences without fullstops or missing capital letter of the first word of a sentence. There are frequent enough mentions of Richard writing letters for her and doing various other things, but references to India vanish completely as do, almost, references to Christopher.

So when one finds entries in Kathleen’s diaries first about Isherwood’s travels in China and then his growing involvement with Vedantism it seems the most unsurprising continuation of her already established interest in cultures other than her own. Anyone aware of Isherwood’s life and work could be forgiven for thinking that his own interests
were a continuation of his mother’s. Nowhere is this feeling stronger than while reading Kathleen’s journal entry for 8 December 1939. ‘However one delightful thing, another letter from Christopher by Clipper air mail - written on 27 November - & left that day from Los Angeles - ...he had been for a large picnic where Greta Garbo, Bertrand Russell & Krishnamurti! were all present & the Huxleys’ (my emphasis). Isherwood attended his first Jiddu Krishnamurti lecture on 14 May 1944 with the Huxleys, Peggy Kiskadden and Bill Caskey, sixteen years after Kathleen’s hearing the Indian theosophist. However, it does not occur to Isherwood to remind his mother of this unique coincidence of them meeting the same person, but in a different place, at a different time and without any planning for such a meeting.

Christopher Isherwood saw his mother for the first time since his departure from England in 1939, on 25 January 1947, as has already been mentioned. He stayed in England till 14 April, spending a lot of time with Kathleen. Although there are entries in her diary about the long conversations they had and the long walks for which they went, the visits to art gallery, library, bookshops in Manchester and listening to plays on the radio together, there is never any mention of Kathleen talking about her interests in India to her Vedantist son or her meeting Krishnamurti. Isherwood visited her again in 1948, in 1951-52, in 1956, 1957 and for the last time in 1959. She died the following year, in the afternoon of 15 June, aged 91.

According to Isherwood’s newest biographer, Peter Parker, very few of Isherwood’s letters to Kathleen survive and none of hers to him. On 2 June 1939 she
had received two advance copies of the reprinted *All the Conspirators*. She had evidently enjoyed reading Cyril Connolly’s introduction enough to start quoting it until Mr. Connolly comes to the ‘dominant theme of his work, the Evil Mother fierce, obstinate, tearful and conventional, who destroys her son in “All the Conspirators”, as ingeniously as in “The Memorial” or “The Ascent of F6.”’ She had broodingly put sixteen dots before writing her next words: ‘Will he never [double underline] see a kindlier aspect of what he still regards as “The Evil Mother” - ? the baleful influence in his life....’

*Kathleen and Frank* notwithstanding, one cannot say that Isherwood’s attitude to his mother ever changed. Towards the end of that book Isherwood concedes, ‘Once she had asked him if Vedanta philosophy included a belief in afterlife’ (KF 499). But that was as far as Isherwood was prepared to go when it came to showing Kathleen’s interest in Indian philosophy. Where he could have mentioned the fact that she had read his Vedantic writings with great interest and that she had read Krishnamurti’s lectures even before she had seen the philosopher, he refrains. There was little reason to expect Kathleen to talk about it. Isherwood himself admitted in that book at one point, ‘...her own opinion meant little to her’ (KF 490). This can be extended to mean that not only did she eschew from broadcasting her own opinion, but also her own interests. She was happy to listen to her famous son about his glamorous life. This does not trouble Isherwood in the least. It is interesting that the only time he shed tears for Kathleen was while copying in his diary Richard’s account of her burial, and then too for a reason that had very little to do with her. ‘And later he tells how M[ummy]’s ¹² ashes were buried in the right-hand mound in front of the house, “Close to the remains of her two dear pussies.”’ That makes him cry but he knows ‘that’s because pussies are part of the great
sensitive area in my feelings surrounding Don’ (D 873). It is a pity that Isherwood never wrote about Kathleen’s Indian interests, for whatever reasons. Whether or not Isherwood’s attitude was justified, it effectively prevented his readers from seeing other aspects of this remarkable woman, especially one aspect that would go far towards contextualising his own Vedantism.

Something that Kathleen also seems to have passed on to her elder son was her sense of humour. She was quick to see the ridiculous, and eagerly entered in her journals stories or even new coinages that she found funny. For example, on 15 March 1911 she described the recently-opened new rooms of the National Gallery as ‘pompious’, before going on to explain that it was the joining of the words ‘pompous’ and ‘pious’! Although an ardent monarchist, she made it a point to write down in her diary the following story told by one of her supper guests. According to Kathleen, as we learn from an entry dated 3 September 1911, the supper guest spoke about the time of his convalescence at Osborne at the Officers’ Home. On one occasion King George V was visiting and he was known for his ‘partiality for seeing the patients in bed and so as there were very few in bed, three or four quite convalescent ones were sent back to bed and groaned loudly when the King made his round!’

Isherwood’s interest in the theatre had started a long time ago. In Kathleen’s diary of 5 November 1910, there is mention of six-year-old Isherwood dressed up as Guy Fawkes. On 4 January 1911 Christopher went to see his first ‘Punch and Judy Show’ which, according to Kathleen, he liked. The proud mother was noting in her diary, on 27
June 1911, ‘… he is much happier with his plays and his theatre made out of a Quaker Oat box. Anything to do with the stage or the theatre seems to interest him more than anything in the world.’ On 3 July Kathleen was informed by Mr. Penrac, a teacher at the local school where Isherwood had started to go from 1 May that year, that he and a boy called Edward Lewis were at the bottom of the class. She was told that while her son was by far the cleverest, he talked and made faces at others! By the time he was eight he had a playmate in a girl named Mirabel. Kathleen noted in her account of 31 August 1912, ‘Mirabel and Christopher played Swiss Family Robinson (which he is now reading!) in the yards of the Technical, fighting wild beasts and sailing on imaginary rafts.’ He had by now started to take performance, public or private, much more seriously than can be expected from one of his age. On 6 September he gave a lecture with slides on the subject of a tour around the world in Frank Isherwood’s dressing room. The audience consisted of his mother. On 20 March 1913 when Kathleen went to see Mrs. Cobbold, mother of Mirabel, she was disturbed to hear that Christopher ‘so easily gets overexcited and frightens himself over the stories he tells himself, and he is always telling himself stories.’

He was introduced to Shakespeare probably around the age of seven. According to an entry in Kathleen’s journal, on 18 September 1911, she read out the story of Macbeth from Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare. He seemed deeply interested in the illustrations of the play that had appeared in a weekly because the play was then being performed at His Majesty’s Theatre. Little wonder, therefore, that when on 6 December Kathleen took him for his long-promised day in London it was the theatres that attracted him while his friend from school, also travelling with them, was far more interested in the ‘big stations.’ In the
first week of April 1913 he refused all invitations because he was having a Shakespeare week at home. The programme had been pinned to the nursery door. Each day he read out *Hamlet, Macbeth, or As You Like It* to teddy bears and dolls seated in the front row of the theatre. His love of *Macbeth* would endure into 1918 when he would make himself a miniature theatre out of a cardboard box and, on 4 January, would give a performance of ‘The Witches of Macbeth’ using cardboard figures. Even as late as in the 1950’s Isherwood would have one of his fictional characters write a novel entitled *As Birds Do, Mother*. The character being Elizabeth Rydal in *The World in the Evening*. ‘As birds do, mother’ is spoken by Macduff’s son in Act IV Scene II of *Macbeth* (WE 79). On 24 April 1920 Kathleen and Christopher would watch all of the five-hour performance of *Hamlet* at the Old Vic - a play they would see again, but this time in modern dress, on 27 August 1925. By 1921 the Monkhouses would come to play an important role in his life. On the evening of 11 January 1921 he would read *As You Like It* with various members of the Monkhouse family, each taking a role. On New Year’s Day, 1925 they saw *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

After his Shakespeare Week subsequent months of 1913 would see other dramatic exercises by him, which would include performances of living in a shack after he saw pictures of the way they lived in shacks in Canada, one more of *Swiss Family Robinson*, and *Sealed Orders* - then being performed at Drury Lane. Given this love of theatre it becomes difficult to take seriously stories he told his mother about a vision he had had of a ghost while sleeping alone in Frank’s room. On asking her son if the old woman said anything to him he told her that she said, ‘You must go away’ and ‘she comes back and looks at me in bed. I say, ‘I don’t want to go away’ and she says ‘Oh but you **must**!’
Kathleen noted that he repeated it several times but did not appear frightened. He added that the old woman just sat at the corner by the chest of drawers, wearing a sash and with a cat!

In 1918, as mentioned above, he took to giving performances using his cardboard box theatre, evolving sophisticated lighting and stage effects, as Kathleen recorded in her entry for 6 January. Already good at making faces at others, as he was reported to be doing during his first months in school, his sense of comedy was becoming evident at this time, as in this letter quoted by Kathleen in her journal entry of 23 June 1914. Isherwood had started his time as a boarder at St. Edmund’s, Hindhead, Surrey the previous month. Writing about the half-term results he told of ‘an exciting moment when Mr. Cyril announced who had passed with honours and among the names he read was my name!! Whereupon someone gave me such a violent slap on the back I nearly fell off the desk I was sitting on.’ Two years later he composed a parody of ‘Horatius’ in *Lays of Ancient Rime* which he called ‘A Lay of Modern Germany.’

By 1916, the widowed Kathleen had started to rebuild her life around her two sons. Some of the time spent by her with her sons was used to introduce literature and the other arts to the boys - especially to Christopher. One way of doing that was to read aloud to her sons. Mention has already been made of Kathleen reading the story of *Macbeth* to Christopher in 1911. On 2 January 1916, she read Isherwood some of Tennyson’s shorter poems. She read *Nicholas Nickleby* to him in September. According to her 1917 diary she read him *Tales of the Great War* on 3 January. On 23 June when she took Isherwood to see *Peter Pan* they also searched for a book of stories from
Wagner’s operas that he wanted. On 9 April, she read aloud *Green Mantle* to him. In Isherwood’s 1917 diary, one of two pre-1939 diaries that have survived, there is an entry for 30 August to the effect that Kathleen read *Kenilworth* to him. She continued to read the book on 11 September. On 20 December she read aloud *Great Expectations*, which she continued to read from into the next year. On 2 August 1918 she started reading Alessandro Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*. There are entries for 23, 27 August, and 9 September, which indicate that the next novel by Dickens that she read to Isherwood was *Our Mutual Friend*. It must be mentioned that by this time, while Kathleen was wondering whether to send him to Repton or Charterhouse for further education, the fourteen year old had started to plan a work of romance and was looking around for fitting quotations to head the various chapters. His collaborator was friend Llewellyn Smith. Later, whenever Isherwood returned home from his boarding school for holidays, the reading sessions resumed. In 1919 Kathleen read him *Esmond* on 2 April, *Barnaby Rudge* on 10 April, and *Martin Chuzzlewit* on 4 August and 3 January 1920. By 1921 Kathleen had also begun reading aloud from Frank’s letters written during the War. On 27 August 1921, the day after his seventeenth birthday, as he recovered from a vaccination, Kathleen read out to him from Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, which was given to her by the Nannie.

It should, however, not be concluded that all of the exposure that he got at this age were only through Kathleen’s reading aloud to him. While there is no mention of Arthur Conan Doyle in any of Kathleen’s extant diaries, Isherwood wrote in his aborted introduction to the Sherlock Holmes adventure ‘The Speckled Band’ in 1956, ‘Since I was ten years old, the adventures of Sherlock Holmes have been my favourite escape
reading; again and again I have turned to them in times of sadness, boredom and ill-health
and never found myself disappointed’ (E 88). Independently he was reading a book called
Windsor Castle with illustrations by Cruickshank, as one discovers from entries for 20
December 1917 and 11 January 1918. A book possibly on the Tower of London by one
Ainsworth is mentioned on 26 April 1918, issues of Punch magazine are noted in the
entry for 6 May 1918, and poems by Walter Scott mentioned in the entry for 29 August
1918. By this time Isherwood had been admitted at Repton. His growing interest in
poetry is indicated by the fact that when Kathleen went out on 27 April 1920, the day
before Isherwood was to return to Repton after the holiday, she looked at the Reference
Library to find a poem by Tennyson that he wanted.

By April 1921 he had started to read back to his mother, as on the 7th, when he
read from Motley’s Dutch Republic in the evening. On 2 January 1922 he read aloud
from Macaulay’s Essays.

During all of 1924 Isherwood was at work on a novel, which he finished on 7
January, the following year. The novel, initially called Christopher Garland, then Lions
and Shadows had its first audience in the author’s mother. He read the novel out in parts
to Kathleen from 17 March to 18 April.

Kathleen also took her son to the theatre as much as possible. On 7 April, 1916
Christopher and his mother went to see Sarah Bernhardt in the play Les Cathedrales - an
event which had made a great impression on Isherwood; so much so that eighty years
later Don Bachardy made mention of it in the course of both the interviews I took of him.
As a Vedantist he later wrote an essay entitled ‘Vivekananda and Sarah Bernhardt’ in the
journal *Vedanta and the West*. For a full list of the plays and films watched by Isherwood from 1916 to 1928, please see Appendices One and Two.

Most often he went to watch plays with Kathleen. Although usually they did not appear to have had any problems getting tickets, occasionally they had to make sacrifices of comfort. For example, on 1 May when they went to St. Martin’s to the Galsworthy and J.M. Barrie double-bill *Loyalties* and *Shall We Join the Ladies*. When they went in, there was only standing room. So, after a while Kathleen left. But Isherwood stood and saw the entire performance. His enthusiasm undiminished, they went out after dinner to the King’s Theatre to see *The Importance of Being Ernest*. On 1 August Isherwood arrived home from Repton to prepare for the Walking Tour of the Swiss Alps. But that evening mother and son set out for the theatre. They first tried *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, but seeing that there was only standing room went on to see Irene Vanbrugh in *Belinda* by Milne. By 6 August he was in France. He returned to England on the 25th. Six days later Kathleen and Christopher went to the cinema to see a newsreel film of Princess Mary’s wedding and then to the theatre for a play. On 1 September Isherwood went alone to see *The Doctor’s Dilemma*.

Isherwood was also by himself when he saw Sybil Thorndyke in a play probably called *Adversting April* on 3 February. He got a chance to see Sybil Thorndyke perform again when, later that month, on the 25th he and Kathleen attended readings by the actress and her husband Louis Casson at Christchurch in Victoria. They would attend another reading by the same thespian couple at the same venue on 13 April 1924. Isherwood would attend another reading by Sybil Thorndyke, this time in the company of friend Edward Upward, on 5 April 1925.
In 1925 while Isherwood’s life seemed to be going nowhere with his deliberately failing the Cambridge Tripos and depressing comments about his novel which he had shown in manuscript to some persons he trusted, his play-going seems not to have suffered. By 1926 Isherwood, casting about for something to do, had become a secretary to the family orchestra of the Mangeots. This meant that he started to spend more and more of his time with the Mangeots, much to Kathleen’s bemusement. On 22 April he went to the Barnes Theatre with the entire Mangeot family. She notes without comment on 22 June that he had taken ‘Mad Mangeot’ to the theatre in the evening. It is not impossible that for her ‘Mad’ was more than just a short form of ‘Madame.’ However, he still made time to go to the theatre with Kathleen. Christopher also went to the theatre sometimes with his beloved Nannie, as on 13 September 1916 when they saw the play *Grumpy* in the Pier, and *Lilac Time* on 9 April 1924. Among his pre-1939 diaries only three survive, one of which is of the year 1917. Although the average length of an entry is not more than a few lines, there always appear to be mentions of the theatre, in some form or another.

Kathleen also took Christopher to the movies, such as *Mice and Men* which they saw on 15 September 1916, although the first time that he saw ‘moving pictures’ was on 26 June 1911 when he went with his mother to see newsreel footage of the Coronation of King George V and Queen Mary held four days earlier. In August 1920, Kathleen noted in her entry for the 12th, when he was at home from camp on holiday one evening he put on ‘an entertainment for R[ichard]’s benefit (conjuring & films) in our bedroom a great success.’ On 6 August 1921 Kathleen and her elder son went to see ‘the pictures’ at the
Picture Palace, after watching the play *The Admirable Chrichton*. By now Isherwood had other people to go to the movies with. For example, two weeks later he took a girl named Betty to a movie which Kathleen considered ‘extraordinary’ for a girl to take to - *Unmarried Mothers*. Two days later, on 23 August he went to the cinema again. This time with his Nannie. But without a doubt the most important movie that Isherwood watched that year was the one he went to as part of a party of four, including Kathleen and his grandfather, on his seventeenth birthday. They went to the Oxford Picture Palace in Oxford Road, Manchester to see Charlie Chaplin’s *The Kid*. Although this was a double-bill programme, and the film was followed by a film version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, we know from Isherwood’s later writings that *The Kid* was the start of his crush on the child star Jackie Coogan. On 14 September while Kathleen met the headmaster of Repton and heard of his hopes of Christopher getting a scholarship, the subject of the discussion was at the cinema house by himself. Towards the end of that year Isherwood won a scholarship to Corpus Christi, and ended the year by going to the pictures, on 30 December. By the end of 1922 he had won a scholarship double the amount of the previous one. While preparations got underway for further studies at Cambridge his going to the theatre and the movies continued unhindered. On 31 January 1923 mother and son saw a film entitled *Lord Byron, the Prince of Lovers*. Isherwood’s heart-throb Jackie Coogan was back on the screen in February in the title role in the film of *Oliver Twist*. Kathleen and Christopher saw the film on the 10th. Isherwood got an excuse to see the child star again when he took Nannie to see the film six days later. Kathleen was by now well aware of Isherwood’s fascination for the child star, because she noted in her journal on 1 March, ‘C went to Cinema at World’s End! in pursuit of Jackie Coogan.’
When Hector Wintle came over four days later the two friends went off to see *Oliver Twist*. For Isherwood this was the fourth time he had seen the film. On 10 September Isherwood watched Coogan in the new feature *Circus Days*.

On joining Cambridge one of the first student clubs of which he became a member was, not surprisingly, the Cambridge Cinema Club. It was the membership of this club that got him in at the Alasky Film Studios at Poole Street, Islington on 18 March 1924 to watch the shooting of a film on the night of the Armistice by the Welch Pearson Film Co. He was back there two days later after breakfast. When he did not come back home by dinnertime, when he was supposed to be back for lunch, Kathleen was understandably worried. On telephoning Hector Wintle and then another friend named Belfrage she learnt that her son was in fact playing the role of a member of the crowd on Armistice night and was thus unable to contact her. When Isherwood finally returned home for the day at 9:45 pm he had taken part in his first film, and had earned 24 pounds, his first earnings. Much later in his life he would have a walk-on part in the film *The Loved One* and would appear as a guest at a Malibu party in George Cukor’s last film *Rich and Famous* (1981). A list of some of the films watched by Isherwood between 1911 and 1924 can be found in Appendix Two.

In 1925 while Isherwood was going around looking for comments on his freshly-written first novel, not all of the comments very favourable if one is to believe Kathleen’s journal entries, his excursions to the cinema and the theatre remained unaffected. In 1926 Isherwood found time out working for the Mangeots to go to the cinema still. He went to the newly-opened Kensington Cinema on 4 January. A gentleman by the name of
Wackerell took him to a Film Society Show on 14 February. But most of the time appears to have been spent writing another novel. This one was tentatively titled *A Seascape with Figures*.

By the end of 1926 he had decided to move out of the house and take up lodgings elsewhere, and so he did by 1927. His address was 26, Redcliffe Road. Moving to a separate address did not mean total self-sufficiency. He frequently came over for meals, sometimes twice a day. However he was permanently back at 36 St. Mary Abbot’s Terrace on 4 November. For this time away from home he had little to show but failing health. There was to show also, however, a new novel called *An Artist to his Circle*. Given this estrangement between mother and son it is not surprising that the number of plays and films that they went to now dwindled to almost nothing. In Kathleen’s diary for 1927 there is mention of just one film and two plays. The film is not even named. This may be because it was not Kathleen but Richard who had gone to the cinema with Christopher on 13 April.

We know very little of Isherwood’s exposure to India during his formative years, but comparatively more about his exposure to literature and the theatre. Considerable light on his early years has been shed by the publication of *The Repton Letters* which contains forty-four letters written by him to Kathleen during his time in Repton. Isherwood was at Repton, Derby from 17 January 1921 to December 1922 when he won a scholarship to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. During that time he was in regular correspondence with his mother and kept her well-informed of his activities, at any rate the ones suitable for Kathleen’s knowledge. The only time that India appeared in his letters was when he wrote in his letter of 20 February 1921: ‘In Civics class, also on Friday, Mr. Snape gave a most interesting lecture on ‘The Growth of Self-Governing
Institutions in India’, which he is going to finish off next time’ (RL 15). When Isherwood went to Cambridge in December 1921 to take his Scholarship Examinations he met Leonard Tristram who was then at the university. Isherwood remarked on the fact that he looked ‘small & pale for 21’ and could not bring their conversation around to Leonard’s mother Mamie Tristram. As mentioned above, by June 1923 Leonard would decide to leave Cambridge and go to India. So there is no way of knowing if on Tuesday, 6 December 1921, in the course of their conversation, Leonard mentioned his interest in India.

References to books and plays, however, are not so hard to come by in the letters. In one letter, while discussing the possible plays mother and son might go to, Isherwood wrote, ‘For our own private and select tastes, I think either The Ninth Earl or The Beggar’s Opera would be excellent’ (RL 16). Later in that letter there is a list of five plays in order of preference that Isherwood wanted his mother to choose from for themselves. It is interesting, and perhaps significant that while The Ninth Earl is at number one, at number two is a play called The Garden of Allah (RL 17-18). The decision to put in second place a play with an Oriental feel may have been a purely aesthetic one, but it just as well may have been made with Kathleen’s interest in the Orient in mind. The same may be said of his enthusiasm for the poetry of ‘the late Japanese Emperor’ in his letter of 15 May 1921(RL 21). But that his delight in the theatre is not out of politeness toward his mother is obvious enough. In a letter dated 12 February 1922 he wrote, ‘last but not the least, the deeply interesting programme of forthcoming events at the King’s Theatre. I would very much like to see Bulldog Drummond, which will apparently be on during Holiday time?’(RL 48) In his last extant
letter of his last term at Repton, dated 27 November, 1922 he wrote, ‘I am so glad that I saw Sybil Thorndyke, even in a stupid play. I should love to take you to Medea, but it never seems to be on during the holidays’ (RL 67).

This level of exposure to the theatre had already begun to have its effect on his day-to-day life. ‘Could you also send my spotted black & white bow tie?’ he asked in one letter written at a time when there were a lot of entertainments being organised, ‘It may be useful for creating atmosphere.’ His experience of being read to by his mother, and later, reading aloud to her and his grandmother at home and with the Monkhouse family was added to by his participation in the then-newly-formed House Reading Society in November 1922. Reading the part of the ‘wicked Count’ in Shelley’s The Cenci provided Isherwood with a chance to give play to the actor in him (RL 67). Mention must also be made of the fact that a part of their secretive activities at Cambridge was Edward Upward’s and Isherwood’s reading aloud to each other, in the midst of the feverish planning of further adventures in ‘Mortmere.’

The Repton letters also prove the importance he had started to attach to the element of humour, especially satire, both in his perception of the world and in the literature he read. In one of his letters, for instance, he refers to School Inspectors with patronising satire as ‘delicious old things’ and describes one in particular as ‘a most fascinating antique...with a violent stutter’ (RL 39). He enjoys reading Penguin Island by Anatole France ‘which is deliciously satirical and amusing’ and the stories in Jane Austen’s Love and Friendship because ‘they are most amusing & satirical’ (RL 44, 59).

Looking at his life till the publication of his first novel, it is obvious that he was exposed
to performance both at home and outside at an early age. Kathleen’s reading to Christopher from the age of seven meant that literature was inextricably linked with performance. He listened to, rather than read, literature. Another dimension to this reception was added to with their going to the theatre. Now a narrative could not only be heard but seen. It, therefore, may have become clear to Christopher that literature, above all else, had to entertain. It is interesting that he should be so excited by the illustrations of the production of *Macbeth* that he found in a weekly. This indicates a keen, early awareness of the importance of the visual element in the overall enjoyment of literature. That he should have decided to tentatively name his novel *Seascape with Figures*, as has been mentioned earlier, thereby clearly indicating the ekphrastic presence of a painting can very well be seen as a continuation of his parents serious interest in that particular visual art. [This awareness of the visual element would be instrumental in not only his becoming friends with artists such as Francis Bacon, David Hockney and Keith Vaughan, but also in his encouraging Don Bachardy to take up art.] He may have realised as early as that that the end of performance was to entertain. To entertain one had to amuse. To amuse a sense of humour became essential. Young Christopher seems to have grasped these linkages without effort or delay.

When he told stories and frightened himself, his narrative-making exercise had started. Having made a narrative he tried it on himself, and gradually perfected the stories by repeating them to others. The story of the apparition of the old woman - Moll of Brabyns - was, as we saw, repeated to Kathleen many times but never with fright. He was probably too excited with his power of invention to be frightened by the nature of the invention. He had even started to take care of the little details that make a good story,
such as speech mannerisms. Hence the apparition’s saying ‘muft’ for ‘must.’ We have
two other examples of the ease with which Isherwood was able to create not only the
voices of characters in his stories but also try out quite successfully different narrative
voices. This facility for pastiche in remarked upon by Brian Finney in his essay ‘Laily,
Mortmere and All That.’ He produced a pastiche of Lewis Carroll’s poem ‘Father
William’ with the characters in the poem now becoming Kaiser Wilhelm and the Crown
Prince, at the age of 12 when he was at St. Edmund’s. Five years later he parodied Sax
Rohmer in a short story called ‘The Hang Yu Mysteries’ in The Phoenix of July 1921
(Finney 293). When he was making faces at classmates not only was he amusing himself
but may be also trying out new personae with which he could populate and enrich his
stories. Making faces indicates a recognition of the variety of facial expressions and
appearances that one is capable of. He had obviously started to enjoy that recognition by
then. But his performance was not solely restricted to the physical level either, as his
letters to Kathleen written from Repton show. His narration of the incident involving him
being knocked off his desk by a classmate’s hard slap from the back is intended not only
to inform but also to amuse, and is therefore an epistolary performance. This early
awareness of the finer points of play-acting would stand him in very good stead during his
time as a screenplay writer for MGM. As for the epistolary performance mentioned here,
this performance is used in his 1967 novel A Meeting by the River where the narrative
progresses, for a large part, through letters exchanged between brothers and in particular
in the letters written by the bisexual brother to his brother, his wife, his mother and his
lover in California.
Going to the theatre made him realise, if Kathleen’s substantial reading of Dickens had not, that an entertaining narrative had to have an appropriate atmosphere. So, by the time he was fourteen his cardboard theatre had sophisticated lighting and stage effects. It is therefore only to be expected that he would become a confident performer soon with or without his cardboard box theatre. Much of this early expertise must doubtless have been useful during his collaborative efforts with Auden, namely the plays such as *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and *Ascent of F6*.

His first literary performances were the stories that he and Edward Upward wrote during their time in Cambridge. In *The Mortmere Stories* (1994) we find Isherwood bringing into play, for the first time that we know of, his understanding of atmosphere, cinematic descriptions, drama and sense of humour to create the desired effect of a Baudelairean topography, populated by Baudelairean characters.

He was at Corpus Christi, Cambridge, as has been mentioned before, from 10 October 1923 to 11 June 1925 when he returned to London after deliberately failing his Tripos Examinations. In her introduction to the published collection of the Mortmere stories Katherine Bucknell remarks on Isherwood’s mastery of imitation when she writes, ‘Isherwood’s lucid control as a story-teller is already apparent, his skill as an imitator lending his prose remarkable technical ease’ (MS 14). She later states, ‘but Isherwood, a gifted imitator in life as in prose, went away the master of what he had explored’ (MS 19). This gift for imitation had been perfected steadily during his reading sessions with Kathleen, his making faces in the class, and his performances with the cardboard theatre at home. The promise detected in the Mortmere stories was, therefore, not the tentative beginning of a creative writer, but a reasonably developed stage of a creative mind.
On reading the ‘Introductory Dialogue’ of *The Mortmere Stories* one is reminded repeatedly of the experiences Isherwood had as a boy growing up at Wybersleigh. His saying that the character of the Watcher in Spanish was modeled partly on Guy Fawkes reminds one of the costume of Guy Fawkes that he once wore at the age of six (MS 34). The revolutionary figure from history also appears in the list drawn up mainly by Isherwood entitled ‘Mortmere: The Persons of the Tragedy.’ Here the headmistress of the girl’s school is called ‘Miss Fawkes.’ Nor is he the only historical or political figure alluded to in the list. The name of ‘Sir Murgatroyd Bevan’, ‘a guest of Harry Belmare’ is followed by that of another guest, called, significantly enough, ‘Aneurin’ (MS 31). The allusion to the politician Aneurin Bevan is thus made obvious.

At another point Isherwood says of the Mortmere stories, ‘The reader is only required to be disgusted. The amusement is for the author’ (MS 46). This seems a natural progression from the objective that almost certainly lay behind his telling Kathleen the story of the apparition. The listener was only required to be frightened. The amusement was for the story-teller. The character of Kester, eleventh Lord Wranvers in the story ‘The Horror in the Tower’ is described as ‘a hunchback of so pronounced a character that his torso seemed to have been bent in half like a piece of cardboard’ (MS 49). This recalls his cardboard theatre where the cardboard figure of Kester would not be out-of-place. His play-going days with Kathleen are recalled by Isherwood’s delineation of the plot of one of the stories when he says, ‘All of which is woven, in the Ibsen manner, round the building of the village hall...’ (MS 45).

A keen sense of humour and especially a taste for satire that had become evident in Isherwood’s character so early is employed here to serve an important dual purpose. It
is used to lampoon the objects of his hatred and to provoke those same objects to disgust, imagining them as the readers of the stories. For example, Mr. Wrythe had to be ‘a comic don’ (MS 35). The stories had to be ‘parodies of the detective story; and their humour is that they lead up to climaxes of disgust and horror absurdly in excess of anything the ordinary reader could be expecting’ (MS 46). There is, therefore, already a recognition of the power of exaggeration in comic writing - a knowledge that was used to great effect in his later fiction.

Among the indicators that these are stories written only in half-seriousness, and that there is a huge amount of fun, is the choice of names. Names were sometimes suggested by history, as has been shown above, at other times they hid a pun, or was in someway indicative of the character’s way of life. Katherine Bucknell is of the opinion that the name ‘Mortmere’ can be understood as crude French for ‘dead mother’, thereby reflecting the ‘antagonistic feelings each had toward his mother’ (MS 13). Continuing that line of thinking one can surmise that the name ‘Belmare’ may also have been an attempt at phonetically reproducing the French word for mother-in-law, an archetypical object of ridicule. In the stories ‘Christmas in the Country’, ‘The Javanese Sapphires’ and ‘The World War’ appears ‘Raynard Moxon.’ In order to help the reader get the idea that the first name is obviously derived from the French word ‘renard’, meaning ‘fox’, the first syllable of the second name rhymes with the English word for the animal.

This school-boyish play with words can also be seen in the list of characters. Just after ‘Mr. Corner’ is introduced as ‘a frequenter of Skull and Trumpet’, ‘Mrs and Miss Claptree’ are rhymingly introduced as ‘the trull and strumpet.’ Also, the fact that the colloquialism for a venereal disease is a part of their name seems to be appropriate since
schoolboy humour is frequently founded on sexual matters. There is a suggestion that one might get the ‘clap’ from the aforementioned ladies as easily as one gets fruits from a tree. But then, the proprietor of ‘The Skull and Trumpet’ is ‘Sargeant Claptree.’

The first Mortmere story of Isherwood was the scatological ‘The Horror in the Tower.’ Physical deformity plays an important role in arousing the revulsion of the reader of the story. Reference has already been made of the peculiar ugliness of Kester, the main character in the story. He is surrounded by equally repulsive characters. There is the small, bald, limping manservant in black with ‘a thin blue line [which] entirely encircled his skull...the trace...of a ghastly wound,’ reminding us of the monster created by Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s Gothic horror story and indeed here can be detected the influence of Charles Dickens, a novelist known for the grotesque ugliness of his malevolent characters (MS 52). The aunt of Kester is a tiny, pale woman who reminds Starn of ‘a water rat or vole’, and has long fingernails covered with ‘peculiar green stains’ (MS 53). As if the ugliness of the human beings is not enough Isherwood also introduces a statuette of Priapus in the story. But not only is the son of Dionysus and probably Aphrodite generally depicted as a small misshapen creature, there is another physical attribute of his which must have made him especially irresistible to Isherwood. Priapus is always depicted as possessing an enormous phallus. This introduces a note of indecency entirely in keeping with the agenda of the writer. What makes Priapus even more significant is that it was once customary to inscribe short, humorous poems or epigrams on his statues. Reference can be made to Priapeia, a first century A.D. collection of eighty Latin poems in the god’s honour. The poems are lively, witty and of varying
degrees of obscenity, just like the Mortmere stories. Humour, is therefore, not only used but also suggested in the narrative in a manner that can be regarded as intextual.

Great care is taken to ensure an almost theatrical atmosphere of mystery and suspense. The story begins with Starn’s words ‘It is strange’ as he and Hynd leave a ruinous and deserted mansion. The reader is not allowed to know how they came to be in that mansion in the first place. The influence of Arthur Conan Doyle becomes only too obvious as the story progresses. The wind appropriately howls on the night of Starn’s arrival at Wranvers castle, just as there is thunder and rain as the story reaches its grisly climax. There is the conspiratorial diversion of Starn’s attention from the dinner table by Kester as the latter’s aunt smuggles laxative pills into the former’s plate of chicken. There are the mysterious footsteps heard on the first night when Starn goes to use the watercloset in the glass tower, contrary to his host’s instructions. And of course there is the obligatory shooting, which comes at the climax of the narrative.

Elements of mystery border the story. Apart from the ruinous and deserted mansion referred to earlier, there is a tantalising mention of ‘that delicate and embarrassing affair with Fooby Bevan of which I have so often spoken to you’ (MS 50). At the end of the story there appears to be a late-night tryst with a mysterious lady about to happen. But perhaps the most mischievous element of mystery in the story is the one couched in the apparently innocuous remark in connection with the Wranvers mania of coprophagia, ‘For many years after my experience, I believed the mania peculiar to the Wranvers family. But, as you know, it is not...’ (MS 63).

The mock-baroque element in ‘The Horror in the Tower’ is at two removes from performance, in the theatrical sense. This is because ‘baroque’ is later used by Isherwood
as an example of ‘camp’ (WE 125). ‘Camp’ in its turn is essentially performative. The validity of this equation becomes self-evident when one considers that Isherwood was to explain later that one could only be camp about something that one took seriously.\textsuperscript{13}

There can be little doubt that in camping up the Baudelairean mood of the dark and the sinister Isherwood and Edward Upward were paying their sincerest tribute to the French poet.

A large element of performance is figured in the Mortmere stories. In most of the stories written by Isherwood, except ‘The Garage in Drover’s Hollow’, ‘The World War’ and the fragment ‘Vision of Scilly’, the narrative opens with a dialogue. This dialogue may be between Edward Hynd and Christopher Starn, or between Starn and Welken (‘Christmas in the Country’) or between Starn and Gunball (‘The Javanese Sapphires’).

Rather than the traditional opening of a story where the location and the atmosphere is communicated through a descriptive passage, most of the Mortmere stories written by Isherwood start \textit{in medias res}, as it were, reminding one of the favourite ‘slice of life’ technique of one of Isherwood’s idols - Katherine Mansfield. This same technique proved to be the most conducive to the project when Isherwood started translating \textit{The Bhagavad Gita}, as we shall see in the third chapter. This importance on verbal interaction is also evident in the fact that the introduction to the stories is written explicitly as ‘The Introductory Dialogue.’

‘The Horror in the Tower’ is followed by four unfinished stories. They are ‘The Greatness of Andy Shanks’, ‘The Adventures of Fooby Bevan’, ‘The Garage in Drover’s Hollow’ and ‘Christmas in the Country.’ At some point in these fragments there is occasion for at least one of the characters to perform or play-act. ‘The Greatness of Andy
Shanks’ comes to an abrupt halt after Starn makes a flamboyant speech wishing the eponymous hero of the story a great future. ‘Christmas in the Country’ also comes to a similar stop after Raynard Moxon stands up and makes a speech in the crowded village hall about a murderer on the loose. Only this time his speech is not greeted with applause but interrupted by Miss Belmare who advises Moxon to ‘save your breath for farts’ (MS 96). Starn gets to perform in the presence of Sir Murgatroyd Bevan in ‘The Adventures of Fooby Bevan’ when the latter charges the former with the task of initiating his son Fooby Bevan to the ‘pleasures proper to his age’ (MS 72). Mr. Castor, whose name is evocative of oil, smiles and smiles and plays the villain in ‘The Garage at Drover’s Hollow’ where his polite tolerance of badly-behaved customers is only matched by the calm with which he orders their later explosion. In unctuous manner may well remind one of Uriah Heep in Dickens’s *David Copperfield*.

The next complete story is ‘The Javanese Sapphires.’ This story features the Isherwood-character Christopher Starn as a Sherlock-Holmes type sleuth, with Gunball playing the role of a Dr. Watson-like side-kick. The story involves Reynard Moxon’s stealing of Gunball’s sapphires with the help of a trained python. As in the case of the earlier finished story, shooting of pistols is accommodated also. The tale ends bathetically, however, with the python as a proud prize exhibit at the Royal Zoological Society, the sapphires in its stomach long since digested. The presence of the snake calls to mind the Conan Doyle story ‘The Speckled Band.’ The suggestion that this story in particular should be suggested by Isherwood’s own reading of Conan Doyle is not without merit because when he would be asked to edit a paperback anthology of English short stories by Dell in New York thirty years later he would choose that same Sherlock-
Holmes adventure. Significantly enough the Trustee of the Conan Doyle Estate objected to Isherwood’s introduction to the story because he had written, ‘In my opinion, Holmes is one of the truly great comic characters in our literature’ adding that ‘he is the classic caricature of the Amateur Detective, in whose person the whole art of detection is made ridiculous’ (E 88). Also, significantly enough, while listing the reasons why he chose this particular story he writes, ‘this story contains an unusually horrible murder and a really full-blooded villain’ - elements that would not be at all out of place in any Mortmere story (E 90). ‘The Javanese Sapphires’ is an example of Isherwood telling a story just for the inherent enjoyment of it, without an eye to any social or academic criticism.

But criticism of Cambridge was seldom far from Isherwood’s mind. This becomes evident in two prose pieces written during 1924. Both are in the epistolary form, one addressed to his Cambridge Tutor and the other to his ‘godson’ named ‘Thomas.’ ‘Letter Written to the Tutor of Corpus after a year’s Historical Study’, dated approximately the summer of 1924, is a deeply satirical, mock-obsequious piece praising the study of History at Cambridge, which indirectly betrays the real disenchantment that studying at Cambridge brought. In elaborately polite prose ‘Christopher Starn’ berates his own ‘youthful and intemperate zeal’ and ‘the billows of an intemperate youth’ and ‘the vain and chimerical aspiration toward the pursuit of letters’ and speaks of his joy at the desertion of ‘that ardour, that boyish fantasy’ (MS 168). The letter recalls the mock-heroic tone of Alexander Pope in the way in which ancient mythology is used to impress on the reader the great import of the letter. Hence, ‘Love, Passion, Ambition, Generosity with other slight frenzies of the blood’ are described as achieving the enormity of ‘a very
Prometheus, a Niobe of our own conceit.’ Compared to this vexation the calm of an academic retreat is ‘a very Lethean cave’ (MS 169).

Exaggeration is one of the time-honoured ways in which humour works. In this letter the politeness is exaggerated, as is the importance of the subject matter. Therefore, the entire letter becomes a sustained exercise in sarcasm. In expressing gratitude for the ‘mild satirical gaze of riper experience’ that the study of History has supposedly afforded him, he is, in fact, casting a not-so-mild satirical gaze on that very ‘riper experience’ itself (MS 168). In that same tone of mock-seriousness is written ‘Prefatory Epistle to my Godson on the Study of History.’ Written around the same time, this letter purports to be an apologia for the study of history. In a tone of grandeur ‘Man’ is called ‘a blot, a blemish, a corrosion’ on ‘God, our Divine Master’s “almighty Plan”’ (MS 170). The story of the Valley of Bones from the Old Testament is held up as ‘a parable of the Historical Method in operation.’ Poetry, on the other hand, is said to have ‘myopic eyes’ (MS 172). But the sting of the piece comes not in the letter but in the ‘Biographical Note’ on the author of the letter, namely, Christopher Starn. His dates are given as 1904 to 1927. It is difficult to say which aspect of the ‘eminent historian and scholar’ is taken more delight in - his scholarship or his ill-health. We are told that his masterpiece was ‘The Rectilinear Idea of Political Confluence’, that his ‘miscellaneous historical remains’ reflected the genius of the author, and that he was posthumously awarded the ‘Noggins Professorship of Abstract Realism.’ Great care is taken to give the reader an idea of his health too. We are told that while working on his masterpiece he became afflicted with cancer and creeping paralysis. After that he went deaf and was much troubled by cataract. Two years later he succumbed to galloping consumption. ‘When the post-
mortem was held, the historian’s internal digestive organisation was discovered to have shrunk to the size of a large walnut’ (MS 173). There is every reason to conclude that Isherwood obviously saw his own life ending just as miserably if he went along with his mother’s wishes to become a don. The figure of the study-bound, ailing don is therefore caricatured with brutality, and bitter satire.

But the most powerful diatribe against Cambridge comes not in the form of an epistle or a story but a poem dated at around a month after his June 1925 withdrawal from the university forever. The poem ‘The Recessional from Cambridge’ is by turns moving and deeply sarcastic. In the poem satire often gives way to obvious invective. The laughter is that of derision. No attempt is spared to shock the tutor to whom the piece is addressed. Still in diaphanous disguise of ‘Christopher Starn’ Isherwood gleefully, and sarcastically asks ‘For what is Love? A physical erection / Easily crushed by two volumes of Bryce’ (MS 164). Reference is made to ‘Your smirking and plump-busted secretary.’ He says of himself and other kindred spirits,

Come with us, such as would most gladly stoop
To eat dog’s excrement like Irish stew,
To savour cat’s urine like caviar,
Rather than blaspheme the Beauty that they [the inhabitants of Mortmere] are. (MS 165)

He describes the Sergeant Claptree as once having been ‘the mate of a Bolivian cruiser/ where men were screwed who drew the ace of spades’ and says that the Sergeant will be spitting, swearing and telling foul rhymes on their journey to Mortmere, while
fellow traveller Reynard Moxon ‘will masturbate behind a copy of The Times’ (MS 166). He tells his tutor, ‘Before you have stirred, / before the sperm-stains on the sheets can harden / We shall be having breakfast in the rectory Garden.’ The parting shock comes in the last two lines: ‘Yes, yes...Quite true...Well, so long...Best of luck./ May you, throughout your life, ne’er lack a friend or fuck’ (MS 167).

He continued to write poetry intermittently during the next few years, and parody was a favourite genre, such as his poem ‘Souvenir des Vacances’ which appeared anonymously in the 1927 volume of Oxford Poetry edited by W.H. Auden and Cecil Day-Lewis. Speaking of that poem he wrote in Exhumations, ‘It is a feeble attempt to parody the current avant-garde poetic manner’ (E 5).

Isherwood wrote no further Mortmere stories till two years later, in the spring of 1927. ‘The World War’ deals with the bombing of the Rectory by Moxon and Farfox from an air-vessel. The narrators Edward Hynd and Christopher Starn had by now become one - Edward Hearn. The animosity against Cambridge is not evident anymore, although the schoolboyish delight in shocking remains undiminished. The rambunctious Miss Belmare accuses Henry Charles, a student passing through Mortmere on a walking tour, of playing bowls ‘like a fucked hen’ (MS 111). Miss Belmare also refers to him as ‘Snakes arse’ (MS 122).

In her introduction to The Mortmere Stories, Katherine Bucknell quotes a letter written by Isherwood to Edward Upward in 1949 in which he says that he will never cease to be grateful to the latter for helping him to acquire ‘the play instinct early, with
Mortmere’ (MS 21). Twenty four years later Isherwood went back even further back in his life and attributed this ‘play instinct’ to someone with whom he spent a lot less time. He told W.I. Scobie, ‘My father, without, I think, realising what he was doing, made me think of writing as play rather than work. He was always telling me stories, encouraging me, taking an interest in my toy theatre, and so on. And it seems to me that writing has been a game that I have gone on playing ever since’ (Scobie, Paris Review 235). So, the influence of Frank in Isherwood’s decision to become a writer was acknowledged eventually. What is not mentioned is the influence Kathleen may have also had on him since it was with her that he often went to the theatre, and who was interested in theatre even when Isherwood was an early-teenager.

In 1927 Isherwood wrote a story that, although was not a part of the Mortmere scheme, shared some interesting affinities with it. In Lions and Shadows he writes that he had tried to experiment with the idea of a school story written in ‘a kind of hybrid language composed of saga phraseology and schoolboy slang’ (LS 119). This mock-heroic element fits in perfectly with the pervasive feeling of parody that one can sense in all the Mortmere stories. In his elaborate and informative introduction to the story written in this mode - ‘Gems of Belgian Architecture’ - he not only fills in the background but also gives us means of looking at the story from a different viewpoint and to put in the context of the Mortmere stories. Writing about the story in Exhumations he talks about the Canadian soldiers from whom he and his schoolmates assiduously collected picture cards which came inside cigarette packets. Reading the introduction leaves one with the feeling that here was play-acting and role-playing going on at an extremely serious level.
It is, for example, interesting that while Isherwood talks of ‘cult of the dead’, ‘the concept of Grief’ meant little to them. What was important was the drama and social prestige of losing a near one, mostly the father, in the War. When a boy returned to his friends after being told that he was bereaved, he took care to describe his sensations on hearing the news (E 170). Every boy learnt quickly and well how to play the role of the bereaved son/brother of a dead War hero. As in play-acting, the real existence of the emotion was immaterial. Portrayal of the appropriate emotion was all.

As far the story itself is concerned we find in it elements that are consistent with what we have seen in The Mortmere Stories. Humour features noticeably, if indirectly. Various characters are called ‘humorist.’ ‘When Mr. Roach found an ink-dart under his desk in the Upper Fourth classroom he made Dog Major write out two hundred times: Baby must not play with nasty black stuff. People who did not like Dodgson, or his putrid little sneak brother either, said that Roach was a humorist’ (E 180). When Griffin’s set of ‘Gems’ goes missing and he wants to search all the Seniors’ lockers, Dodgson says, ‘No, better wait a bit in case some humorist is trying to be funny’(E 180). Many years later, when the boys return to the school as Old Boys, there is a casual enquiry about one Leslie Stagge. ‘Was he the man who went to a co-educational school and got bunked?’ asks one. Enjoins another, ‘Yes. A bit of a humorist’ (E 189).

The shadow of Arthur Conan Doyle is not far to seek either. The story involves a piece of detection – finding out who took the missing Gems of Belgian Architecture series of cigarette cards – a shooting (Dwight’s firing a rifle at Griffin’s head, albeit missing it) and there is the obvious tribute of Dwight’s jokingly calling Griffin Sherlock Holmes and Sale, My Dear Watson.
By this time Isherwood had been working on two novels. He had started work on his first novel, entitled *Lions and Shadows* in the summer of 1923. By January, 1925 the novel, now finished, had become *Christopher Garland*. In January next year he began work another novel, entitled *The Summer in the House*. By Easter he had begun work on a third. This one was called *Seascape with Figures*. This was the first version of the novel that was accepted by publishers Jonathan Cape on 5 January 1928. It was published on 18 May as *All the Conspirators* in which we find a more sophisticated use of humour and play-acting than has so far been seen.

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1 Transcript of Frank Isherwood’s letters and Kathleen Isherwood’s diaries, ts., Christopher Isherwood Papers, U of Texas, Austin, p. 52. All subsequent references in the text as FIL.

2 This gem was doubtless bought by Henry during his world tour, which included some time in India. Kathleen visited Marple Hall, the ancestral seat of the Isherwoods, in June 1924 and found Henry unexpectedly hospitable. On 6 June she spent the day packing books and was later read to by Henry. He read to her the Indian section of his account of the world tour. Kathleen thought it very good. Peter Parker, letter to the author, 10 June 1997.

3 When not otherwise stated the quotations of Kathleen Isherwood from this point onwards come from her diaries directly. Kathleen Isherwood, diary, ms., U of Texas, Austin.

4 Here one has to make it clear that in her journals Kathleen did not pay much attention to punctuation and often ended and began sentences without full stops or capitals. Also, instead of writing ‘and’ or ‘&’ she always used the ‘+’ sign. I have retained the underlinings that Kathleen habitually made in her journals.
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3 Commonly known as ‘Jix’ he ‘was a particularly repressive and puritanical Home Secretary in the 1920’s.’

Peter Parker, letter to the author, 10 June 1997.

6 One is led to this conclusion by an entry in Kathleen’s diary dated 6 August 1929. It reads, ‘She [Ella] goes off to India on the 30th to try & arrange a satisfactory future for the Orphan Girls Home to which she has given so much of her life...’

7 According to Peter Parker, Herky - short for ‘Hercules’ - Ross was the son of Kathleen’s friend Marjorie Ross and had been tutored by Isherwood briefly in 1927. Peter Parker, letter to the author, 10 June 1997.

8 Reading Kathleen Isherwood’s diaries one is struck by various idiosyncratic elements. One of them is her use of dots. She often uses rows of dots when she is thinking deeply about something or is sad. In this case she does indeed use five dots. There will be other instances of such a use of dots later in this chapter.

9 This obviously refers to General Dyer’s massacre of Punjabis at the Jallianwallah Bagh in Punjab on 13 April, 1919, which was the Indian New Year’s Day that year.

10 The British Rule in India generally believed to have started in the year 1757. One of the reasons for the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was the belief that the British Rule in India would last a hundred years.

11 Peter Parker, letter to the author, 2 April 1997.

12 According to Don Bachardy, Isherwood was too embarrassed to actually write the word ‘Mummy’ in his diary, even though that is how he always referred to Kathleen when speaking about her. Niladri R. Chatterjee, ‘Portrait of the Artist as Companion,’ The Isherwood Century (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000) p. 99.

13 ‘The basic thing about camp, in my definition, is that it is laughter, fun, gaiety, frivolity which one takes fundamentally absolutely seriously.’ Paul Bailey, Interview with Christopher Isherwood. BBC Radio 3. 28 March 1977.