4

Queer transplanting from the Himalayas to Yorkshire: Reginald Farrer's loves for men and alpine plants (1880–1920)

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The death at the age of forty of the prominent writer and plant hunter Reginald Farrer in 1920 was not simply of concern to his own family and the botanical community.[1] Gardening was a passion shared by huge numbers of British people ensuring that books such as Farrer's *My Rock-Garden* (1908) were widely read and admired. Plant hunters were also popular celebrities whose exploits were celebrated as evidence of British scientific endeavour and physical endurance. He is remembered today for having done much to popularize the cultivation of alpine plants, but his life and work had a wider cultural significance than was apprehended even in the days of his fame.

Farrer was not intent on simply studying and collecting botanical specimens from the Alps and the Himalayas. He was also in love with the plants whom he termed 'the perverse little people of the hills'.[2] As indicated by the title of another of his books, *Among the Hills: A Book of Joy in High Places* (1911), it was only amongst such 'children of the hills' that he felt emotionally fulfilled.[3] Farrer regularly anthropomorphized the objects of his passion. Talking as other imperial Englishmen might have done of an admired human tribe, he labelled saxifrages as a 'glorious race'. Of *Saxifraga lilacina* (lilac alpine saxifrage), to give just one example, Farrer recorded that 'this year he bloomed in character, and I have never in all my life seen a more exquisite creature'.[4] That he thought of these plants as children on the cusp of puberty can be deduced from his remark on male and female flowers that a floral Romeo 'can fertilize Juliet and cause her to conceive'.[5] Such adolescent loveliness could bring on a state of ecstasy which implicitly had sexual overtones, as when Farrer confides in his readers that 'I grow stark drunk on the scent of the Cluster-Narcissus. It gives me a pleasure so sharp and deep as almost to be wicked, and an agony'.[6]

The nearest Farrer came to publicly declaring his love was for the plants that he anthropomorphized and addressed as male. One such was an elusive plant called *Eritrichium nanum* (alpine forget-me-not). Will he find him again, Farrer wondered, amongst the mist and scree? 'Ah, *Eritrichium* is near! Down, beating heart!… How the minutes pulse agonizingly by, growing into a sort of abscess of suspense, to break in

a moment into the full rapture of relief…' as the two were reunited.[7] The bright blue 'eyes' of this flower were widely admired by connoisseurs but *The Times*' reviewer of Farrer's *In a Yorkshire Garden* (1909) warned the 'fanatical lover' to be wary of 'that beauty that tempts some gardeners like the sirens' song'.[8] This suggests that it was the plant hunter, rather than the objects of his passion, that was eccentric and perverse.

Farrer's life story ranges across Britain from London and Oxford to Yorkshire and Scotland. His travels took him widely across Europe and Asia. In the process he popularized the notion that people across rural, suburban and urban Britain could create exotic landscapes in miniature in their own back gardens. His work implied that the limitations of place – topographic, climatic, cultural and perhaps even sexual –

Figure 2 Reginald Ferrar (*c.* 1910). Courtesy Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh Library and Archives.

could be transcended by passion and devotion. This chapter will follow Farrer across the UK and on his journeys around the world. It will explore the ways in which his sexuality became entangled with the practice of transplanting alpine plants from foreign countries to Britain. In the process boundaries between human and plant were transgressed, and opportunities created through gardening to queer localities in the mother country.

Gilded youth from Oxford to Asia

Britain has hills and mountains, albeit ones of fairly modest proportions. Patriotic pride in these landscapes aligned with belief in the peoples of Britain as being marked by modesty and sobriety. The fertility of the lowlands supported an abundant and ordered population intent, it was widely assumed, on its own heterosexual reproduction. Reginald Farrer had other ideas. From a young age he looked beyond these parochial horizons towards erotic lands filled with exotic possibilities both botanical and human. He was born in London in 1880 and was the eldest son of James Anson Farrer, a barrister whose country residence was Ingleborough Hall at Clapham in the Yorkshire Dales. The Farrers were farmers who used their growing wealth to buy properties including most of the houses in the village which they sought, paternalistically, to improve. While other male members of the family focused on the work of investment and estate management, Farrer, from his early years, was fascinated by the untamed landscape of the high fells. The limestone cliffs that were a notable feature of the land behind the house were the inspiration for his early interest in rock plants.

The young boy had a harelip and was subjected to a series of unsuccessful medical operations. He was educated mostly at home and spent much time exploring the local fells. His passion for rock gardening originated at this time, but it was at Balliol College, Oxford, which he attended from 1898 to 1902, that he fell into the cultivation of aesthetic cultural tastes. He rejected the respectable evangelical pieties of his family and turned to orientalist literary expression, which he fostered through a visit in 1903 to Peking (Beijing), Korea and Japan. In so doing, he was following in the footsteps of a number of sexual fellow travellers, notably Edward Carpenter, but he then went further by converting to Buddhism.[9] All this costly self-cultivation was enabled by his access to financial support from his family. For the rest of his life Farrer took off on regular expeditions, first to the Alps and latterly to China. In the course of the First World War he joined the Ministry of Information and worked there under the novelist John Buchan, who had been his contemporary at university. He died of an infection when on a plant-hunting expedition to Burma.

Reginald Farrer was Osbert Sitwell's second cousin and the latter observed of his relation that 'I believe he was designed to shine in the world of talk and manners. With this purpose in view, he had been obliged to become highly stylized, almost affected, in his manner of conversation, since it would have been of no use to him to pretend to be ordinary.'[10] The literary result was almost a stereotype of Wildean aestheticism and was pastiched as such in the pages of *Punch*.[11] In 1908 Farrer could be found opining that it

was folly to say that 'plain faces can hide lovely souls. If the soul be lovely, the face must have its beauty too… nothing beautiful can ever be altogether evil'. Thus, there was hope for 'any beautiful man or woman who has ever followed desire through selfishness and treachery. For in the very fact of outward beauty lies the promise of inner good'.[12] Such attitudes stayed with him to the end, according to Sitwell, who quoted a letter sent from Burma during the 'last months' in which Farrer argued that 'there is nothing in the whole world worthwhile except the creation of beauty'.[13] He had, thus, imbibed the doctrine of art for art's sake and rigorously applied it to gardening. Growing vegetables was a utilitarian pursuit and, therefore, to him 'immoral'. By contrast 'the cultivation of a flower, that gives you no earthly reward, but the solely spiritual one of completing loveliness' was essential.[14]

Farrer's fascination with Eastern mysticism was intense and sincere even though it was derived from a peculiarly Protestant British viewpoint. Roman Catholicism held a strong allure for a number of men with unorthodox sexual tastes in later nineteenth-century Britain, partly because of the freedom from the imperative to marry offered by its requirement for clerical celibacy, but also because of its aesthetic exoticism.[15] Farrer was notable for blending associations of Catholicism with Eastern religions. He was, thereby, transferring his cultural imagination from one place to another. Thus in *The Garden of Asia: Impressions from Japan* (1904) he wrote of viewing priests performing their duties in the 'chancel' of a Japanese temple in which 'their copes form, in the faint light, the effect of the east widow of Châtres – a dim mist of kaleidoscopic splendours'.[16] His explanation for the similarity was that Catholicism had borrowed its liturgy from the East, an idea that was widespread in British Protestant circles, albeit as a slur on their Catholic opponents.[17] There are photographs of Farrer in Eastern dress, which he showed every indication of pleasure in donning[18] (Figure 2).

Four years after his time in Japan, Farrer discussed the temples of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in much the same terms. The tooth relic of the Buddha was, we hear, kept at Kandy in a 'monstrance' and was displayed in a similar manner to the Roman Catholic Elevation of the Host. At the vital moment he observed that 'the Abbot is in ecstasy. An eager, fumbling movement, so emotional as to fail at first of its purpose, and the Holy Thing is revealed'.[19] This seems to echo, if with less textual self-assurance, the sensuous fascination of Dorian Gray, who 'loved to kneel down on the cold marble pavement, and watch the priest, in his stiff flowered vestment, slowly, and with white hands, moving aside the veil of the tabernacle'.[20] But Farrer, unlike Wilde's *homme fatal*, was uninterested in aestheticizing Christianity as can be seen from the jibe he inserted into his presentation of the *Cruciferae* family of plants (brassicas, mustards and cabbages) as uniformly ugly: 'the vast Natural Order of the Cross-bearers evidently thinks that in providing us with all our important vegetables it has done quite enough for humanity. For few other Natural Orders are horticulturally so barren of charm'.[21]

That Farrer did, however, share certain (homo)sexual tastes with Dorian Gray and, of course, with Wilde himself was made clear in what is his most substantial biography, Nicola Shulman's *A Rage for Rock Gardening: The Story of Reginald Farrer, Gardener, Writer and Plant Collector* (2001). It was, she argued, no accident that when at Oxford he set up a debating society named after Ganymede, the boy lover of Zeus.[22] Earlier garden historians had already alluded to the matter with remarks to the effect that

Farrer always idolized 'golden young men'.[23] These tastes were rarely made explicit in Farrer's own published writings but they did surface from time to time, as for instance on the occasion recounted in *On the Eaves of the World* (1917) when he took emotional leave of a favourite 'coolie'. This man, the reader is informed, was 'a rose-cheeked Adonis in the flush of sapid youth' whose person recalled the '*jeunesse dorée* of Balliol'.[24] In such passages Farrer linked the homoerotic delights of Oxford with those of the Himalayas. Because he anthropomorphized the plants he desired, his practices of transplanting to Britain brought the bloom of exotic youth to places such as his family's garden in Yorkshire. Farrer thus transformed suburban, metropolitan and domestic spaces into locales of queer desire.

While I argue that Farrer's ecstatic engagements with the botanical world were evidence of frustrated, or at least sublimated, desire, direct evidence for Farrer's same-sex love resides not in his published works but substantially in a series of letters now held at the Somerset Heritage Centre in Taunton. He wrote these to his sometime university friend Aubrey Herbert, who accompanied him to Ceylon on the RMA Ophir in 1907, but, perhaps with symbolic appropriateness, declined to disembark with him. Herbert was the elder son from the second marriage of the fourth Earl of Carnarvon, who had been Secretary of State for the Colonies under Lord Derby and Benjamin Disraeli, and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland under Lord Salisbury. Herbert worked in the diplomatic service, first in Tokyo and then in Constantinople, where his exploits inspired John Buchan to romanticize him as the eponymous hero of his novel *Greenmantle* (1916). Herbert married in 1910 and from the following year sat as an MP in the House of Commons. Farrer it may be noted, by contrast, never married and failed to get himself elected to Parliament on his one attempt in 1910. As a champion of Albanian nationalism Herbert was twice offered the throne of that country and he continued to interest himself in diplomacy and espionage in Turkey and the Balkans until his death from blood poisoning after a dental operation in 1923.

Many of the letters are incomplete and it seems likely that some of the more intense material has been intentionally mislaid, but what remains still evidences not simply an intense friendship but a sustained, if unrequited, love affair.[25] In one undated letter Farrer says that he has been emotionally unburdening himself to women. But, he complains, 'it is not the <u>real</u> self one gives them… one's real self always belongs to the men who <u>are closest to one</u> – To you I should sometimes like to make my wails'.[26] Another letter, dated 12 November (and assigned to 1909 in a later hand), is addressed to that 'curious and strange one' with whom Farrer says he has 'absolutely nothing in common'. Perhaps, Farrer asks Herbert, 'you have only a faint conception of how enormously I value you and revel in you and take refuge in you?'[27] And he also wrote the following:

> you are the only person that makes me at all human… I like being with you so much. I enjoy coming to life and feeling warm. But as a rule I am so chilly… But how silly to cry for moons: one is, I suppose, what one is; with no real hope of alteration: no man, by taking thought can add a cubit to his nature's nature, or put another inch or so around his heart. I wish I could fall in love again, though, with some more profitable person![28]

Literature and orientalism

The emotional landscape of Britain proved unrewarding to Farrer. His feelings for Herbert, as for other British men, went unrequited. He, therefore, developed an internal world of fantasy in which travel enabled connections with cultural, botanical and, if implicitly, sexual diversity. He succeeded in channelling his emotional energies into writing both plays and novels, but he was, of course, hampered by the dangers associated with open discussion of same-sex passion. After a youthful period of (bad) Wildean melodrama he developed a style that he might have compared optimistically to that of his literary heroine Jane Austen. A series of novels appeared that attempted to combine family romance with topical issues, as in *The House of Shadows* (1906), which laboured to explore suicide and euthanasia. The reader was asked to ponder the question of whether it was right for a person to kill himself if he had a malignant heritable disease. One possible reference of this was to sexual degeneracy since that was sometimes regarded as being passed down from generation to generation.

The Sundered Streams: The History of a Memory that Had No Full Stops (1907) was one of Farrer's livelier novelistic efforts. The central character, Kingston Darnley, was clearly based on Farrer himself. Darnley had less money than his peers at Oxford University and was much more inhibited. 'His friends', we learn, 'held the free, frank language only possible to the perfectly cleanly mind, naked and unashamed; he, for his part, was always uneasy in his nudity'.[29] Darnley, we learn, was a spiritual young man who was handsome albeit with 'an excessive personal daintiness'.[30] He was apparently very well informed on women's need for a man so as 'to feel the thrill of his virility in the deep fibres of their consciousness'. He was also well aware of his failings in relation to such matters. The only females drawn to him seem perverse in their tastes since he believes that 'it is only to the depraved woman that the saint is of personal interest and, even then, her interest is as depraved as her nature'.[31]

In due course Darnley does move on from the homosocial world of Oxford and get married, but his greatest epiphany occurs not in the marital bed but in contemplation of (masculine) nature experienced during the glorious sunrise of a morning when one yearns to be 'naked in the naked embrace of the world':

> The world stands out pure and glorious in its nudity – vivid, stainless, triumphant as the white flawlessness of the young Apollo newly risen out of the dark, formless void. The upsurging day is our emblem of youth fresh from slumber – beautiful, ardent, splendid in the clear glory of his build – before he makes haste to hide himself in the sombre trappings of convention.[32]

The visual effect of such a beautiful young man walking naked into one's bedroom can be appreciated from Leonard Raven-Hill's 'Wake Up, England!' (1916). It is an amusing coincidence that the man in bed in this a cartoon, which was ostensibly all about the promotion of daylight saving, resembles Farrer[33] (Figure 3). Subsequent to this homoerotic encounter with the dawn, Darnley receives spiritual aid from a Buddhist 'bishop' before, in due time, falling into the fascinating company of a beautiful

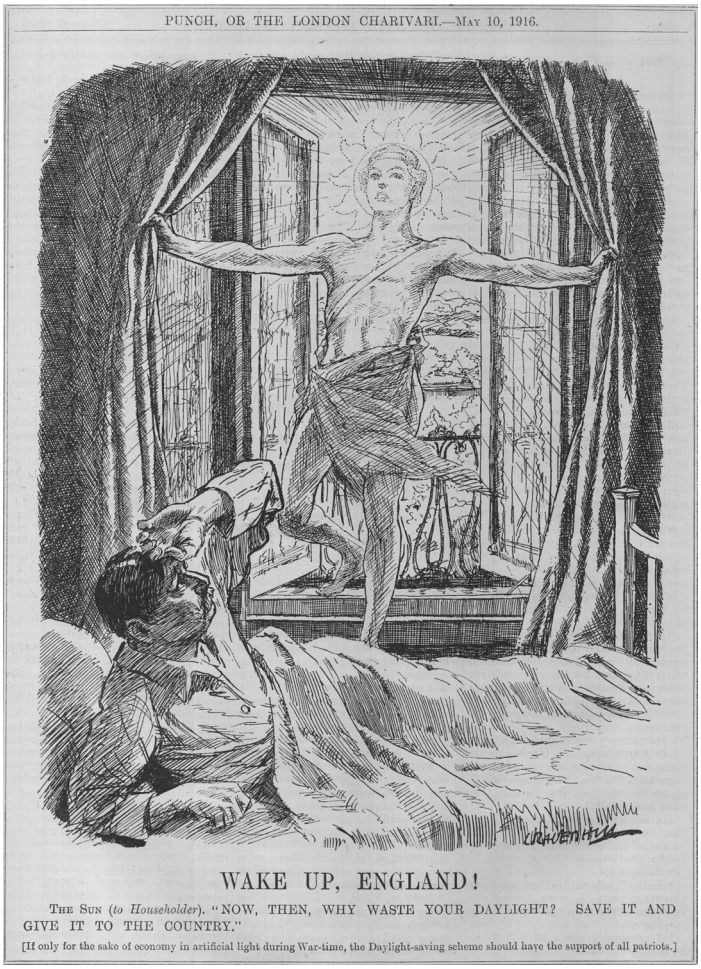

Figure 3 'Wake Up, England!'. Courtesy of Keele University Library.

youth called Ivor Restormel.[34] An excuse for this same-sex passion is furnished by the convenient notion that Restormel possesses the reincarnated soul of a woman whom Darnley's migrant spirit had loved in a previous life.[35] On this basis, and to the understandable dismay of Darnley's wife, the youth is invited to move into the family household, where he duly becomes the best chum of their charming son Jim. All ends in tragedy when the two boys drown together.

If all this represents an inventive, if far-fetched, attempt to disguise a narrative of same-sex passion, the subsequent novel *The Ways of Rebellion* (1908) veers off into high camp. Here Farrer, in effect, turns up in glamour drag as 'Her Imperial Resplendence the Princess Anne Komnena'. This unlikely woman and Byzantine royal personage alternates between fads including a brief passion for 'Pan-Islamism…

but this enthusiasm soon waned before the attraction of botany, and in a little while Princess Anne was perlustrating the bogs and precipices of the Highlands in pursuit of rarities, while her long-suffering followers agonized behind, and wished that *Saxifraga cernua* and *Gentiana nivalis* has never been heard of'.[36] Anne's face is described as but a mask for her true feelings and she exhibits many of the other tropes of decadence.

If *The Sundered Streams* (1907) reworks Farrer's experience of Oxford, *The Ways of Rebellion* (1908) re-presents the geographies of his travels after leaving university. The novel moves between Scotland and Italy while paying due service to the 'golden splendour, the long agony and gorgeous death of the Byzantine Empire'.[37] Farrer proudly assembled over forty laudatory press-clippings for his travelogue *The Garden of Asia* (1904) from across the popular press, but the smaller collection of cuttings related to his fictional works provides eloquent testimony to the comparative public indifference to his novels.[38] It seems that his histrionic style was found incongruous when applied in British novelistic settings but was regarded as appropriate for travel narratives of the 'Orient'. It was thus only by combining his passion for exotic plants, travel and for writing that he was able to achieve popular success.

A parallel for Reginald Farrer's oriental, botanical and sexual interests is provided by the horticultural pursuits and literary legacy of Maurice Maria, self-styled Comte de Mauny-Talvande. De Mauny first came to public attention for having set up a school in France which – the presence of his English (and only subsequently estranged) wife notwithstanding – swiftly became associated with rumours of immorality.[39] The couple had a son who served in the First World War, and it was this experience that appears to have inspired De Mauny's first book, *The Suffering of Youth, 1914–1918* (1919). Such suffering was, apparently, what brought forth mature (and exquisite) manhood just as 'the gentian, of such striking and beautiful blue, from which it borrows its name, grows in hard, clayish soil, almost in the snow… [and the] rarest of lilies, black with golden tassels, is only to be found in the poisonous marshes of the Chinese frontier. Yet they are amongst the most beautiful and rarest flowers'.[40] Aesthetic forging in the military would not, however, benefit all sons. Pity one who had a 'father who would not study your nature and temperament… and crushed you as he would a flower in the bud, because you were a "Hybrid", different from the common everyday type'.[41] But the boy who enjoys parental understanding may seek and find a special friend older than himself who is modelled on his father.[42]

De Mauny's erotic fantasies seem, thus, to have blurred the boundaries between the generations and even between parents and lovers. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that, as he explains in *Gardening in Ceylon* (1921), the East was also a source of queer delight: of the 1100 'coolies' on a tea estate 'we are bound to find a treasure'.[43] 'I love this race of children', he wrote in *The Gardens of Taprobane* (1937); 'I love their innate, almost feminine distinction… The honey-colour of their skin, the bright colours of their clothes, harmonize with their surroundings; the greens of the tropical vegetation, the gold of the sands, the blue of sky and sea'.[44] In this account of his own island garden just off the coast of Ceylon, de Mauny explains that his gardener, Raman, and 'the garden are two in one; I cannot think of one without thinking of the other, and to-day, after eight years, they are both in the prime of youth'.[45]

There is much to abhor in these texts, redolent as they are with imperialism, racism, orientalism and paedophile eroticism, but they are significant as a comparator for Farrer's own works because of the way in which de Mauny's erotic gaze shifts back and forth between boys and flowers seen as natives and as transplants. The local plants, like their human proxies, served as objects of the admiring gaze of the colonial masters.[46] Supposedly primitive peoples could be understood as being at one and the same time close to their own erotic urges and teasingly childlike in their lack of adult inhibition.[47] When our attention shifts from Farrer's fictional writings to his series of books about plant-hunting in Asia, we can see his fascination in the exotic delights of the lands that he is describing, even if his passion for men is sublimated into his hunt for plants. This aspect of Farrer's work can be situated in relation to the ways in which erotic experiences and same-sex desires were layered into various aspects of the colonial experience.[48] Jill Dildur, however, has argued for a more positive appreciation of his legacy on the grounds that he was not an imperial supremacist but a man who employed forms of orientalist romanticization which did not rely on the crudest levels of stereotyping. It is notable that Farrer's own time in Ceylon does not seem to have produced much erotic or floral enthusiasm.[49] His particular mission was to transplant finds from cool high-altitude locations such as the Himalayas to a country (Great Britain) that was cool because of its high latitude. Farrer's geographical Other was, to some degree, more like an equal partner to Britain because it was climatically similar to it and thus coded as more masculine than the tropical lowlands. Furthermore, he critiqued the British homeland and sought to improve it by importing foreign plants, an act which Dildur identified as positive 'transculturation'. This resulted in what might be termed a queering – though she does not use this term – which promoted 'a general unsettling of the edges of colonial and national attitudes toward alterity'.[50]

De Mauny's writings are much more clearly decadent than those of Farrer. While the Anglophone Frenchman remained an obscure figure, Farrer rose to popular fame in Britain. Their erotic interests seem to have been related, but it seems that only the latter was able to speak to a wider constituency of readers. A possible explanation for why that was emerges from consideration of what Anne Helmreich has referred to as the 'conundrum of the aesthetic garden'.[51] She argues that popular gardening in early-twentieth-century Britain was torn between the desire of the middle classes for fashionable living and their concern not to appear self-indulgent or immoral. To that end the pursuit of beauty had to be combined with the effortful labour of planning and maintaining the garden in association with scientific interest in plants and the technicalities of their origins and cultivation. The diverse plantings of the Edwardian garden could thus appear as the evidences not of decadent accumulation but of British mastery over the imperatives of distance and climate. Through strenuous treks in hazardous conditions Reginald Farrer brought home seeds that, when germinated, furthered domestic fantasies of imperialist mastery by enabling his readers to behold the floral wonders of the Alps and the Himalayas in their backyards. But in the process the modest and sober landscapes of his native land were queerly aestheticized by the transplanted exotics that he brought home.

Hunting men and plants in the Himalayas

While de Mauny admired his tropical plants and boys, Farrer sought manly companions with whom to experience mountain highs. Of course, the avowed intention of plant-hunting expeditions was scientific, as he wrote in 1915 to excuse his absence, at that point, from war service.[52] Farrer, therefore, aimed to secure a botanically trained British companion for his Himalayan expeditions, but his personal motivations were tangled up with his erotic and emotional sensibility. For his 1914 journey he sought out William Purdom for the expertise on China that he had acquired as a plant hunter in the region after spending time at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. He was the same age as Farrer and also – and perhaps not co-incidentally – 'tall and lean of magnificent Nordic physique'.[53] It was to be another case of unrequited love. Farrer's account of this time, published posthumously as *The Rainbow Bridge* (1921), was quirkily assigned thus:

> Still
> To Bill
> It is my will
> This Book is dedicated.
>
> Although
> I know
> The Press will go
> And say it's overstated.[54]

The dedication, of which he says his publishers disapproved, was to 'my beloved companion, Purdom, whom we will henceforth allow ourselves the freedom of knowing as Bill'.[55] And it was in Bill's company, if not with his direct participation, that Farrer experienced what he recorded as his most sublime ecstasies. His very prose begins to fall apart as he describes an ascent in the Tibetan borderlands as a state of 'agonizing with height and ecstasy… delirious in the vista of marvellous peaks all round me, swimming with silvery vapours, and blinding in the unmitigated glory of virgin snow'.[56] Farrer's vision slides in and out of focus between his companion, the sherpas and the 'fantastic pinnacles of dolomite jetting up from the slopes in phallic towers with streaming flanks of wetness in the sunshine'.[57] He would not find a wife or children to take his name, but in such places he found and proudly depicted new species of plant that would do so. He thus painted *Primula farreri* upright, blooming and beautiful amongst the phallic thrusting of mountain pinnacles.[58] A few years later Purdom's sister wrote to Farrer of their shared admiration for William, saying that she had repeatedly urged her brother to answer his many letters. Occasionally he did so, joking about the old days when Farrer was wont to call him Seductive Bill because of his charm.[59]

Purdom elected to stay in China and Farrer looked elsewhere for scientific advice and companionship. Euan H. M. Cox, who was seventeen years younger than Farrer,

came with him on his final expedition in 1919–20. Scion of a jute-manufacturing family from Dundee, Cox went to Rugby School and then to Cambridge University before serving in the First World War. Invalided out of the army, he became John Buchan's secretary and duly met Farrer. The Cox/Farrer collaboration was neither as botanically successful nor as emotionally enjoyable as the Purdom/Farrer one. It seems that Farrer was sometimes depressed and often drunk. However, this picture of unhappiness is complicated by a set of letters that turned up at auction in 2008 and which are now housed in the Farrer Archive at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, where they are stored along with the main set of Farrer family papers. But while the latter are substantially composed of discreet letters of Reginald to this mother, these additional materials, dated 1919–20, are quite different in tone. Their recipient is not identified, but on internal evidence the most likely candidate appears to be Ernest Frederick Gye, who was one year older than Farrer.

Gye's father was a theatrical impresario and his mother, Dame Emma Albani, was an opera singer. Gye entered the British Foreign Office in 1903 and made his way slowly, and obscurely, up the ranks. He was a man of literary and musical interests who never married and, assuming that he has been correctly identified as the recipient of these letters, seems to have been a flamboyantly camp homosexual. He is addressed as 'poison', or 'venom', presumably because he exudes unhealthy vice, by Farrer who signs himself 'poppet'. The camp banter which composes these letters gives a decidedly queer complexion to Farrer's last months. It was, evidently, not only through plant-hunting and literature that Farrer attempted to displace some of his sexual frustrations at this final stage of his life.

On 8 June 1920 Farrer wrote to Herbert and his wife to ask their assistance in helping him to find a 'fair one': '"It is not good for man to live alone:" as I get along in the vale of years, I do feel the needs, the duty, the rightness of marriage closing in on me.'[60] Taken on its own terms, this might suggest the weariness of someone who had thought himself a confirmed bachelor even if it hardly reads like a ringing endorsement of heterosexual love. But almost a year earlier he had written to Gye to say that he had found himself yearning for a wife, but after a drink had decided this really was not what he wanted. 'Send me out Cleopatra herself in a carpet', he reported, 'and I would send her packing'.[61] Cox features in these letters under the nickname 'Jumps'. Farrer had alluded to the possible homosocial/homoerotic ambiguities of their relations in a letter to the younger man which argued that they were not sufficiently in sympathy to sustain a fellowship of the 'Achilles and Patrokles' kind.[62] To Gye he complained that, in the case of Cox, the gulf of age and social class was too great. This could be read two ways: either that these were genuine reasons for the failure of same-sex relations or that Farrer was once more fantasizing that the return of his desires was possible. Whichever was the case these letters depict Cox as being in on the patter of smutty jokes and camp innuendo that Farrer was sharing with Gye. 'Jumps is at my shoulder', he wrote, at one point, 'plying me with loves for you'.[63] Furthermore they were both in the habit of referring to Cox's intended replacement in the role of Farrer's plant-hunting partner, Derek Milner, as 'Beautiful Boy' or simply 'BB'.[64]

Sadly, 'BB' never arrived due to a death in the family and Farrer looked elsewhere for at least casual companionship: 'BB has slain a sister to avoid my company, but I got off with a soldier man this morning who seems like coming with me and like being a pleasure if he does.'[65] Cox returned home where he wrote an account of his time with Farrer which he dedicated to Ernest Gye, who had given permission for (decorous) quotes from some of the plant hunter's correspondence with him.[66] Moreover, and tantalizingly, Cox was duly painted in brooding and intense mode by the homosexual painter Glyn Philpot.[67] All this notwithstanding Cox went on to marry. By contrast the comment of [Elizabeth] Bettina Varè, the wife of an Italian diplomat in Peking, that 'I remember your reason for liking China was no women and no music' suggests that Farrer's interests were both fixed and widely known.[68]

The Gye letters bring to the last months of Farrer's life a flavour of that aspect of Ronald Hyam's *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (1990), which explored the diversity of ways in which the British Empire operated as a field of sexual opportunity.[69] Farrer, however, was not having a terribly gay time in either sense of the word. He continued to cruise the streets, but with mostly unsatisfactory results: 'I felt quite sad and solitary; nor have my street walkings here proved either persevering or productive, though the flesh has been most willing. A little man in the soldier's band has smiled at me, and that is the limit of my successes.'[70] In some ways he was – and seems to have felt himself to be – a failure. And yet that cannot have been a surprise to him since he had written in *In a Yorkshire Garden* (1909) that

> monstrosities, such as double daffodils, and geniuses, and militant suffragettes, are usually brief and evanescent phenomena, aborted variations from the race, that soon die out, of mingled weakness and sterility.
>
> That is the price that Nature imposes on genius and all such abnormalities, while a comfortable and perennial continuance is the consolation with which she rewards the normal, the typical, the conventional.[71]

Farrer's impact in Britain

Life in remote areas was a risky business. Many of Farrer's fellow plant hunters failed to pass middle age. He appears to have suffered an acute infection, perhaps diphtheria, which was aggravated by excessive drinking. When news of his demise in 1920 on the border of Burma and China reached the mother country, it provoked a mixed reaction. While his contributions to horticulture were widely acknowledged, his literary style came in for considerable criticism. The plant hunter Frank Kingdon-Ward found him 'guilty of hyperbole and extravagant language'.[72] *The Gardeners' Chronicle* identified him as the most 'picturesque' plant hunter who irritated those who looked towards botanical science rather than aesthetic appreciation.[73] And it was noted elsewhere that 'he wrote, as a rule, from a peculiar angle of his own, giving queer human attributes to his plants'.[74] He was, it seems, too much the amateur dilettante who might climb a mountain complete with 'a thunderstorm, hail, *Geranium argenteum*, and Asti Spumante at the top'.[75]

Nevertheless, his physical accomplishments were understood as, to some extent, making up for his personal effeminacy and sexual deviance. He was admired for that 'grit which brought a man of such comparatively frail physique through such difficulties and dangers'.[76] His service during the war, even though it had been brief and had not involved active military duty, was mentioned with appreciation. This redeemed even his Buddhism once 'his sense of patriotism awoke and swamped every political and ethical theory he ever had'.[77] Seen at a century's remove the life and work of Reginald Farrer continue to be of importance in the history of plant collecting and horticulture, but they also can tell us about some of the ways in which same-sex desire was displaced not merely onto homosocial friendships but also onto relations with the natural world. Farrer's obsession with beautiful little plants reminds us of the accumulation of bibelots and dandified attention to recondite particularities of detail and aesthetic effect.[78] His masculinity was, however, buttressed by his reputation as a mountaineer and active hunter – as opposed to a passive collector – of plants.

Writing was also part of his life's work, and he regarded his literary creativity as being, by implication, associated not just with frustrated desire in general but with same-sex desire in particular: 'Every man still left alive is crammed down to bursting-point with emotions of which he must relieve himself or go mad. And if feathered females do not happen to be his chosen outlet, he gets his utterance achieved somehow else, in a book or a poem.'[79] He admired Jane Austen above all other writers, referred to her as the 'Divine' and compared himself to various of her female characters.[80] Only Sappho and 'Divine Jane' stood as women among the top ranks of art, 'both of them expressers gone astray into a woman's body, and neither of them female in their mentality at all'.[81] By saying this Farrer was giving voice to the view that they were inverts, which is to say people physically of one sex but with the mentality of the other.

It was with such individuals who, like many plants, queerly mingled male and female attributes that he felt he had most in common. He also knew that his society at large was no more tolerant of sexual eccentrics than that of the times of Jane Austen, who, as he wrote in an influential piece of literary criticism in the *Quarterly Review,* 'behind the official biographies, and the pleasant little empty letters… we feel always… lived remote in a great reserve'.[82] This was pretty much the judgement of E. H. M. Cox on Farrer: his 'was a happiness only gained by dint of great self-control' and 'he had a peculiar power of living within himself'.[83] The result of this was that 'his was not an easy character to read.. [but that] when he was engaged on anything to do with plants, he was like a being transformed. Then he was direct in his emotions… But remove him from his plants, and everything was clothed'.[84] Cox was writing long before popular understanding of closeted homosexuality but he intuited the prominence of secrecy and discretion in Farrer's life and personality.

Yet some queer men did see in the veiled Farrer a sexual compatriot. One example of this was the writer Robert Gathorne-Hardy and his partner Kyrle Leng, who shared a home at Stanford Dingley in Berkshire.[85] The queerness of their gardening and plant-hunting emerges from Gathorne-Hardy's *Three Acres and a Mill* (1939), which, he declared, was 'a record of over a period of twelve years of the home and garden

that I share with a friend. Many of our flowers have been collected by us abroad'.[86] The importance of rock gardening to Gathorne-Hardy is clear from the fact that one of the main changes he made after moving into his country residence was to install a giant rockery. His photograph in the volume shows him 'in the rock garden' wearing a tight t-shirt.[87] Gathorne-Hardy also highlighted, albeit in code, that Farrer had been a flamboyant homosexual: 'The debt of rock gardeners to Reginald Farrer is, of course, unlimited', we read, 'but new readers of Farrer should be given one warning. He was, we are apt to forget, a product of the aesthetic nineties'.[88]

In 1952 the wit, playwright and musician Noël Coward released one of his most famous songs: 'There Are Bad Times Just Around the Corner'. His lyrics parodied a range of patriotic clichés including that of England as a garden. It needed, he quipped, manuring. Coward could be seen as exemplary of a certain kind of twentieth-century homosexual man whose life was centred on the urban and the urbane. Yet he, like many of his class, maintained homes both in the city and in the country. The garden, whether in its rural or suburban incarnations, was not necessarily an adjunct only to heteronormative family life. Those who assembled collections of exquisite plants, particularly miniature ones, could be compared to men such as Lord Ronald Gower. The art historian John Potvin, in his book on the visual culture of queer unmarried men, classed this artist as a 'bachelor of a different sort' whose 'alternative masculinity' centred on the collection of art objects, trinkets and *bric-à-brac*.[89]

Michael Camille has argued for the importance of such queer material practices: 'it is not just that the unmentionable nature of same-sex desire has often meant that the subject had to communicate the "secret" in a coded language, but the fact that this language was a system of objects. What could not be said could be spoken through things'.[90] Transgressive desire was often encoded through the collection of exotics because orientalism constructed Asia as feminine and effeminate. Eastern lands offered the promise of opportunities to queer men that ranged from homosocial bonding to homosexual passion.[91] High in the Himalayas, in pursuit of narcissi as 'white and delicate as sawn ivory', the queer plant hunter could combine the manly pursuit of mountain climbing with an obsession with nature's rarest and most precious art objects.[92] Moreover, the plant hunter himself would come to be seen as a glamorous and heroic figure.

Reginald Farrer spent much of this time travelling but he repeatedly returned to the garden in Yorkshire, where he transplanted many of his exotic finds. Derek Jarman's house in Dungeness is a famous example of the purposive queering of marginal space through gardening.[93] Because Farrer was, of necessity, secretive about his sexuality, his Yorkshire garden was not constructed as an openly queer space in quite the same way. Nevertheless, the heteronormative landscape of his family's estate, centred as it was on property investment and the perpetuation of the family line, was rejected by Farrer. Parts of the rock gardens survive, albeit in a deteriorating condition, as if providing eloquent testimony to his assertion that 'genius and all such abnormalities' were doomed to die out.[94] Yet Farrer's garden was not built to last for generations but was, like Jarman's, partly a personal meditation on happiness and the transient nature

of beauty. His Yorkshire rock garden was not, for Farrer, as to some extent we might see it, a place of imperialist appropriation:

> Prosperity is a physical matter, a question of comfort and Dreadnoughts (i.e. battleships), and well-padded chairs, and an untaxed breakfast-table; happiness is entirely a soul-state, quite beyond all connection with comfort; and is found, by the wise nation or the wise individual, in quiet, secret places.[95]

The magnolias that bloom in the surrounding woodland gardens each spring are a testament to a queer passion for exotic mountain plants and the men who helped him find them. But Farrer did not only queer his family's country estate, he also contributed to the queering of gardens across Britain. His example suggested that people the length of the country could find an escape from the limitations of their class origins, geographical location and repressive culture. Since, as he put it, 'in a ten-yard strip at Brixton or Balham (i.e. ordinary London suburbs) you can triumphantly enjoy a thing of beauty'.[96] Farrer did not invent the practice of making rockeries but, through books such as *The English Rock Garden* (1919), he popularized it such that it became widespread in suburbia.[97] Such interests brought with them the possibility of queer fellowship based on the shared hobby of alpine gardening and the dreams that it sustained. Whether in the town or the country, in the north or in the south, a person could build and rule his or her own miniature Shangri-La, where queer pleasures were not criminalized but embraced. Gardeners meeting fellow enthusiasts at alpine plant shows might find they had other tastes in common. As Farrer put it in the coded language of his best-selling books, if 'it be a vain fancy to find personalities in flowers, then many gardeners, I believe, staid and respectable people, are guilty, in their secret hearts, of vain, delightful fancies'.[98]

Notes

1 I thank the editors for organizing the conference at which I gave quite a different paper and for their appreciation for my subsequent enthusiasm for queer gardening. I also thank the Trustees of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh for permission to include extracts from the Farrer Papers and the South West Heritage Trust in relation to the Herbert Papers.
2 Reginald Farrer, *My Rock-Garden* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908c), 2.
3 Reginald Farrer, *Among the Hills: A Book of Joy in High Places* (London: Headley, 1911), 33.
4 Farrer, *My Rock-Garden*, 132.
5 Farrer, *Among the Hills*, 33.
6 Reginald Farrer, *In a Yorkshire Garden* (London: Edward Arnold, 1909), 65.
7 Farrer, *My Rock-Garden*, 257.
8 *The Times*, 'Difficult Plants', 20 November 1909, 6.
9 Anthony Copley, *A Spiritual Bloomsbury: Hinduism and Homosexuality in the Lives and Writings of Edward Carpenter, E. M. Forster, and Christopher Isherwood* (Lanham,

MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 9–105; Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5.

10 Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences or Courteous Revelations: Being a Book of Characters and the Fifth and Last Volume of Left Hand, Right Hand!: An Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 16.

11 *Punch* 127, 'Our Booking Office' (1904): 162.

12 Reginald Farrer, *Alpines and Bog Plants* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908a), 75.

13 Quoted in Sitwell, *Noble Essences*, 21.

14 Farrer, *In a Yorkshire Garden*, 180.

15 Dominic Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek Jarman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

16 Reginald Farrer, *The Garden of Asia: Impressions from Japan* (London: Methuen, 1904), 121.

17 Farrer, *The Garden of Asia*, 122; Dominic Janes, *Victorian Reformation: The Fight Over Idolatry in the Church of England, 1840–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 93–110.

18 Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh Library and Archives, Farrer Papers, RJF/2/1/2/3, in folder of materials relating to 1910, *Reginald Farrer*, undated photograph.

19 Farrer, *My Rock-Garden*, 76.

20 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Camille Cauti (New York: Barnes and Noble, [1890–1891] 2003), 128.

21 Farrer, *Alpines and Bog Plants*, 61.

22 Nicola Shulman, *A Rage for Rock Gardening: The Story of Reginald Farrer, Gardener, Writer and Plant Collector* (London: Short Books, 2003), 20.

23 John L. Illingworth, 'The Correspondence of Reginald Farrer', in *Reginald Farrer: Dalesman, Planthunter, Gardener*, ed. John L. Illingworth and Jane Routh, Centre for North-West Regional Studies, Occasional Paper 19 (Lancaster: Lancaster University, 1991), 72.

24 Reginald Farrer, *On the Eaves of the World*, volume 2 (London: Edward Arnold, 1917b), 301. Compare Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 63.

25 Margaret Fitzherbert, *The Man Who Was Greenmantle: A Biography of Aubrey Herbert* (London: John Murray, 1983), 20.

26 Somerset Heritage Centre (SHC), Taunton, SRO DD/Her/38, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Aubrey Herbert, emphasis in original. It should be noted that many of these letters are incomplete and it appears that the assemblage was redacted at some point.

27 SHC, SRO DD/Her/38, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Aubrey Herbert. Discussed in Fitzherbert, *The Man Who was Greenmantle*, 88–9.

28 SHC, SRO DD/Her/38/2, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Aubrey Herbert.

29 Reginald Farrer, *The Sundered Streams: The History of a Memory That Had No Full Stops* (London: Edward Arnold, 1907), 44.

30 Farrer, *The Sundered Streams*, 44.

31 Ibid., 47.

32 Ibid., 89.

33 Leonard Raven Hill, 'Wake Up, England!', *Punch* 150 (1916): 307.

34 Farrer, *The Sundered Streams*, 273.

35 Ibid., 325.

36 Reginald Farrer, *The Ways of Rebellion* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908d), 184.

37 Farrer, *The Ways of Rebellion*, 299.
38 Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh Library and Archives (RBGE), RJF/2/1/6/8, Reginald Farrer, personal book of press notices.
39 Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 2003), 66–79.
40 Maurice Maria De Mauny Talvande, *The Suffering of Youth, 1914–1918* (London: Grant Richards, 1919), 28.
41 De Mauny Talvande, *The Suffering of Youth*, 27.
42 Ibid., 26.
43 Maurice Maria De Mauny Talvande, *Gardening in Ceylon* (Colombo: H. W. Cave, 1921), 17.
44 Maurice Maria De Mauny Talvande, *The Gardens of Taprobane*, ed. Bernard Niall (London: Williams and Norgate, 1937), 23–4.
45 De Mauny Talvande, *The Gardens of Taprobane*, 68.
46 Craig Smith, 'Every man must kill the thing he loves: Empire, homoerotics, and nationalism in John Buchan's Prester John', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 28, no. 2 (1995): 187; Ruth Livesey, 'Morris, carpenter, Wilde, and the political aesthetics of labor', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32, no. 2 (2004): 610.
47 Neville Hoad, 'Arrested development or the queerness of savages: Resisting evolutionary narratives of difference', *Postcolonial Studies* 3, no. 2 (2000): 140.
48 Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
49 Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, 41–3.
50 Jill Didur, '"The perverse little people of the hills": Unearthing ecology and transculturation in Reginald Farrer's alpine plant hunting', in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, ed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur and Anthony Carrigan (New York: Routledge, 2015), 69.
51 Anne Helmreich, 'Body and soul: The conundrum of the aesthetic garden', *Garden History* 36, no. 2 (2008): 273–88.
52 Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Bonham Carter 171, folio 78, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Violet Bonham Carter, 9 August 1915, 78.
53 Alice Coats quoted in William T. Stearn, 'An Introductory Tribute to Reginald Farrer', in *Reginald Farrer*, 6.
54 Reginald Farrer, *The Rainbow Bridge* (London: Edward Arnold, 1921), v.
55 Farrer, *The Rainbow Bridge*, 1.
56 Ibid., 81.
57 Ibid., 82.
58 Ibid., 274.
59 RGBE/2/1/6/5, Letter, William Purdom to Reginald Farrer, 11 April [no year].
60 SHC, SRO DD/Her/38, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Aubrey Herbert, emphasis in original.
61 RBGE, RJF/4/2, folio 2, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Ernest Gye, 26 July 1919.
62 RGBE, RJF/2/1/5/13, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Euan Cox, 10 February 1920.
63 RGBE, RJF/4/3.2, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Ernest Gye, 24 September 1919.
64 Shulman, *A Rage for Rock Gardening*, 111.
65 RGBE, RJF/4/12.1, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Ernest Gye, 23 December 1919.
66 Euan H. M. Cox, *Farrer's Last Journey: Upper Burma, 1919–20* (London: Dulau, 1926), v and vii.

67 Glyn Philpot, *Euan H. M. Cox* (*c.*1930), oil on canvas, 76.2 × 64.8 cm, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh (PG 3277); J. G. P. Delaney, *Glyn Philpot: His Life and Work* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 90 and 100–1.
68 Letter Elizabeth Varè to Reginald Farrer, 1 November 1916, RGBE RJF/2/1/4/1; see Smith (2012), 100–9.
69 Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 88–114. See also Philip Holden, 'Rethinking colonial discourse analysis and queer studies', in *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature*, ed. Philip Holden and Richard J. Ruppel (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 295–321; Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, 3; Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 54–98.
70 RGBE RJF/4/13.2, Letter, Reginald Farrer to Ernest Gye, 26 February 1920.
71 Farrer, *In a Yorkshire Garden*, 6.
72 Frank Kingdon-Ward, 'Obituary: Reginald farrer', *Geographical Journal* 57, no. 1 (1921): 69. Much the same accusation was made prior to Farrer's death in *Nature* 104, no. 19, 'Alpine Plants for Rock Gardens', February 1920, 664.
73 *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 'Reginald Farrer', 20 November 1920, 247.
74 Clarence Elliott, 'The Late Reginald Farrer: An Appreciation', *Gardeners' Chronicle*, January 1921, 31.
75 Elliott, 'The Late Reginald Farrer', 31.
76 *The Times*, 'Mr. Reginald Farrer', 19 November 1920, 13.
77 *The Times*, 'Reginald Farrer: Traveler, Botanist, and Writer', 13 December 1920, 16.
78 Janell Watson, *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust: The Collection and Consumption of Curiosities* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20.
79 Reginald Farrer, *The Void of War: Letters from Three Fronts* (London: Constable, 1918), 169.
80 Jeff Mather, 'Camping in China with the divine Jane: The travel writing of Reginald Farrer', *Journeys* 10, no. 2 (2009): 53.
81 Farrer, *The Void of War*, 169.
82 Reginald Farrer, 'Jane Austen', *Quarterly Review* 228, no. 452 (1917a): 2.
83 Cox, *Farrer's Last Journey*, xvi.
84 Cox, *Farrer's Last Journey*, 211.
85 Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *Half an Arch: A Memoir* (London: Timewell, 2004), 183; Robert was a part-time secretary to Logan Pearsall Smith, as discussed in Chapter 6.
86 Robert Gathorne-Hardy, *Three Acres and a Mill* (London: J. M. Dent, 1939), xi.
87 Gathorne-Hardy, *Three Acres and a Mill*, opposite 12.
88 Gathorne-Hardy, *Three Acres and a Mill*, 113.
89 John Potvin, *Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture and the Modern Interior in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 44.
90 Michael Camille, 'Editor's Introduction', *Art History* 24, no. 2 (April 2001): 164.
91 Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality*, 32–8.
92 For an example of mountaineering and same-sex desire, see Alan Hankinson, *Geoffrey Winthrop Young: Poet, Mountaineer, Educator* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995). For the desire for botanical rarities, see Niamh Downing, '"Fritillary fever": Cultivating the self and gardening the world in the writing of Clara Coltman Vyvyan', in *Women in Transit through Literary Liminal Spaces*, ed. Teresa Gómez Reus and Terry Gifford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 176.

93 Chris Steyaert, 'Queering SPACE: Heterotopic life in Derek Jarman's garden', *Gender, Work and Organization* 17, no. 1 (2010): 55; Dominic Janes, *Picturing the Closet: Male Secrecy and Homosexual Visibility in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 179–92.
94 Farrer, *In a Yorkshire Garden,* 6; Rebecca Pullen, *Reginald Farrer's Rock Garden, Clapham, North Yorkshire: Analytical Survey and Assessment*, Research Report Series no. 7–2016 (Portsmouth: Historic England, 2016).
95 Farrer, *In a Yorkshire Garden,* 7.
96 Farrer, *Alpines and Bog Plants*, 3.
97 Reginald Farrer, *The English Rock-Garden* (London: T. E. and E. C. Jack, 1919). For a history of alpine gardening see Graham Stuart Thomas, *The Rock Garden and Its Plants: From Grotto to Alpine House* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2004), 59–84.
98 Farrer, *Alpines and Bog Plants*, 205.