Christopher Isherwood (1904–1986) is the subject of this recent, massive 824-page biography. Parker divides his subject’s life into two parts: “England Made Me,” covering Isherwood’s youth, up to his controversial decision to emigrate to America in 1939, and the second, covering his time in California, where he remained until his death. The biography follows a simple, chronological path.

Initially, it might appear unnecessary that Isherwood need a biography at all; much of his fiction is heavily autobiographical, particularly the popular and enduring Berlin books, and especially Goodbye to Berlin (1939). It contains the notably provocative phrase “I am a camera,” which leads the reader to suppose that not only is the diary-form text going to be autobiographical but also frank and objective. Mr. Norris Changes Trains (1935) also deals with his time in Berlin, particularly his encounters with Gerald Hamilton, on whom Mr. Norris is undoubtedly based; Prater Violet (1945) stems from Isherwood’s own experiences in the film industry. In addition, Isherwood himself published no less than four autobiographies: Lions and Shadows (1938), which covers the 1920s; Christopher and His Kind (1976) which, in reassessing the period 1929–1939, goes through the material of the Berlin books; My Guru and His Disciple (1980), which is about Prabhavananda and Isherwood’s belief in Vedanta; and Kathleen and Frank (1971), which centres on his parents. Furthermore, Isherwood also published his diaries covering the period 1939–1960. There seems to be a massive amount of material covering every period of his life.

The need for a biography stems from two sources; the first is an aesthetic one, as in Isherwood’s case, one would be mistaken to equate autobiography with some form of revelatory truth that fiction has not displayed. Quite the contrary, at the very beginning of Lions and Shadows, Isherwood addresses the reader with a warning note: “I had better start by saying what this book is not: it is not, in the ordinary journalistic sense of the word, an autobiography; it contains no ‘revelations’; it is never ‘indiscreet’; it is not even entirely ‘true’” (2000: [7]). What it is about, then? we might well ask. The note goes on to tell us that it describes “the first stages in a lifelong education” but it should be read “as a novel.” The boundary between fiction and autobiography seems difficult to delineate. In fact, one thing that becomes clear from reading Parker’s work is the extent to which Isherwood felt an incessant urge to rewrite and reassess his life, as did many other notable writers of the thirties; some, like Stephen Spender, author of World within World (1951), or Edward Upward, In the Thirties (1962), formed part of Isherwood’s intimate circle. However, I would suggest that we see this rewriting as a consequence of the belief that modernity provides no permanent or meaningful relationships; to put it down to a case of artistic vanity would be to miss the point entirely. The Isherwood that we come to know remains very much a product of 1930s European aesthetics, even though the second half of his life is lived out in a completely different part of the world, whose climate, political ambience and aesthetics are remarkably different.

The second source is that despite his own experiences dominating his work, Isherwood was, when he wanted to be, a most secretive person. Peter Parker acknowledges that his
task was greatly facilitated by the help of Isherwood’s partner—Don Bachardy—in accessing private documents and records. In addition, Bachardy waived his right of approval of the text. The portrait of the artist we receive is therefore of the “warts and all” variety. To me, the most astonishing secret, if that is the correct term, concerns the most central element of autobiography: the family. In the early pages, Parker comments:

Isherwood’s mother was very much alive when he published Lions and Shadows, but she is ruthlessly excised from the narrative, as is his younger brother, and his father, who was killed in the First World War. The book contains several vague references to “my family,” but the reader has no idea of its individual components. In order to scratch his parents and brother from the record, Isherwood also had to avoid mention of his childhood. It is as if he wanted to present himself as arriving in the world fully formed, having already attained the age of reason. (4)

Parker’s warning is rightly placed so emphatically and so early on in the biography. One reason why it is a revelation is that Isherwood himself gave no hint that his family was actually landed gentry, their seat being Marple Hall; they traced their family ancestry back centuries. In fact, as we find out, his most illustrious ancestor was “Bradshawe the Regicide,” the judge who presided over the trial of Charles Stuart. After Isherwood’s father was killed in World War I, his mother becomes very much the dominating parental figure. Isherwood’s relationship with her was a taut, stormy Freudian situation, though, as Parker points out, despite giving the impression that he was hard-up, whenever he was short of cash he had no qualms in asking her for money to save his lover Heinz. Why was there so much antagonism between son and mother? Parker explains that “Kathleen’s sexual attitudes may have struck Isherwood as illiberal and antiquated, but the principal cause of his resentment towards her was not that she would not accept his sexuality but that she would not accept his choice of career”(178). This reflects both on his professional and academic careers. Isherwood, who had won a scholarship to Cambridge, decided to end his university career there by writing answers to his tripos exams that were “clever, insolent and academically suicidal”(113). In later years, their relationship became less antagonistic; Isherwood even based his portrait of his parents on her diaries. The best kept secret has been, up to now, Isherwood’s younger brother, Richard, an unfortunate man with a long history of mental illness. His drunkenness, mental instability and decay mark the end of the Bradshawe-Isherwood line. Christopher felt sympathy for him, almost seeing his quirks and eccentricities as a form of rebellion against the establishment; quite clearly the camera is anything but neutral.

Parker highlights Isherwood’s role as a leading figure in gay literature while recognising that gay sexuality is somewhat hidden or coded in the Berlin books, making it paradoxical that film and theatre versions, of which there have been many, hint at a heterosexual relationship between narrator and the leading female fictional character Sally Bowles. Parker supplies some very revealing information about the real-life character, Jean Ross, judiciously analysing the similarities and differences in their motivation for coming to and living in the German capital. Berlin was a sexual paradise for Isherwood but it also meant total liberation from the restrictions of—what he believed to be—backward, inward-looking Britain, operating in a similar way as Hellenism did for Romantics such as Percy Shelley or Byron. In other words, it encompasses the sexual, the intellectual, the aesthetic
and the political. Sexuality refers not simply to opportunity and activity but also to the fact
that it is discussed and researched: Berlin was the home of Hirschfeld’s Institut für
Sexualwissenschaft, where Isherwood virtually lived on his arrival in Berlin (183). Artistically,
Berlin is an innovative city both for its architecture and its cinema. It is presumably for this
reason that Isherwood parallels writing and film. One valuable contribution Parker makes
is to clarify the question of “boys.” He points out first that, however liberating an
experience Berlin might have been, homosexuality was, as in Britain, illegal in Germany;
the number of young male prostitutes available was determined more by the poverty of the
time than by sexual choice. Readers of Goodbye to Berlin may remember that enormous
tension is caused when Otto spends his money and free time on girls. The Otto/Heinz
figure helps to define Isherwood’s sexuality farther. Isherwood was especially attracted to
much younger men: boys meant boys, as the photographs Parker supplies of his American
lovers, Bill Harris, Bill Caskey and above all Don Bachardy make astoundingly clear.
Isherwood was attracted to boys of a lower social class. Heinz is the figure who dominates
his life in the 1930s, as Isherwood travels to Greece, the Canary Islands and Portugal.
Isherwood fails in his attempt to get Heinz Mexican citizenship in order to avoid
conscription in a long process which in retrospect makes it difficult to believe that he could
part with his—or rather Kathleen’s—money so easily. Then comes the strange thing: when
Heinz returns to Germany, he seems to be completely forgotten. In a similar way, when
W.H. Auden and Isherwood are friends and/or lovers, they seem inseparable. Hence, they
write together an odd melange on the war in China entitled Journey to a War (1939), but
once they go to the USA and live apart, contact is minimal. In the case of Heinz, when
Christopher and His Kind was going to be translated into German, Isherwood wrote to him.
Parker explains that

[a] fortnight later he [Heinz] wrote to say he was horrified by Isherwood’s frankness and that
reading the book had brought him to the edge of despair. He was appalled by the idea that
his wife, son or grandchildren might read it. It they did, he might end up being divorced
and he would have to blow his own head off. Isherwood wrote back to reassure his old lover
that the book would not be published in Germany under any circumstances and pleading with
Heinz not be angry with him. Heinz replied in a friendly enough manner, but the two old
friends never communicated again. (806–07)

Two enormous periods of silence come either side of a rather intense exchange, and this
seems to be the pattern—intensity and silence—that marks Isherwood’s existence.

For me, this period of the 1930s is the biography’s most interesting part, due perhaps
to its intensity in comparison to the rather staid existence which followed. In the same way
that Parker draws a revealing picture of Isherwood’s family, he likewise depicts the network
of friendship and relationships in which Isherwood played a part; I will mention only a few.
Of the artistic ones, apart from the relationship with Auden, are those with Stephen
Spender and his photographer brother Humphrey, and Jonathan Upward; but perhaps
most outstanding of all is the detailed account of his dealings with John Lehmann, editor
of the highly influential New Writing. There are also fascinating glimpses of Rosamond
Lehmann and Virginia Woolf. Benjamin Britten, as a great admirer, makes several
appearances, too. Yet, and this covers the more detailed examination of his American
friends and lovers too, the more one wants to have greater insight, the greater the relevance
of Parker’s observation becomes:
It is the interaction between Isherwood and his characters—“the experience of the encounter”—that fixes them in the reader’s mind. He once told Spender that characters ceased to exist for him when he was not in the room with them, that he could not imagine what they were doing when they left his immediate presence. (321–22)

Without this admission, he would seem nothing but an enormous egotist.

Why Auden and Isherwood emigrated in 1939 is a complex question. For example, the fact that Isherwood lived in America and became an American citizen makes it seem that he had decided to effect a permanent move. But, in choosing to end the first half of his biography with an extract from Isherwood’s published diary, Parker, by adding no comment to it, therefore warns us of the dangers of retrospective interpretation. The extract ends with Auden and Isherwood on the boat train, “Suddenly, we were twelve and nine years old. ‘Well?’ I said, ‘We’re off again.’ ‘Goody,’ said Auden” (413). At this moment, and in these words, it is just another trip. However, both knew that they would be accused of abandoning Europe on the brink of an inevitable war, a serious but nevertheless understandable reproach for Britain’s most famous members of the avant-garde. Perhaps it is this sense of Spengler-induced doom that led Isherwood to define his decision with the phrase that he had separated “himself from Mother and Motherland at one stroke” (418). At this juncture, Parker strives and succeeds, in my opinion, to identify the slippery nature of Isherwood’s beliefs. Many readers of his Berlin books confront this situation when they ask themselves why Isherwood frequently seems oblivious to the political situation of Berlin, seeing it mainly as a gay paradise. Parker reiterates throughout the biography that Isherwood was the least politically motivated writer of his 1930s entourage. “Politics didn’t really interest him as much as people: their way of life and fate. Consequently his opposition [to fascism] was personal rather than strictly political, and was chiefly motivated by Heinz” (419). This might sound petty or conceited, but this is the way he thought and lived. Similarly, it is clear that he disliked the rigid class system of Britain and all that that implied, but to pinpoint what he would put in its place is a fruitless task; we will never know. Therefore, the commonplace belief that writers of the 1930s were either inclined to communism or fascism, or communism or Catholicism, is not a template that fits Isherwood’s life.

“But From Mother and Motherland” expresses rebirth, free from domineering mother and repressive country. He uses this gendered term because if his public politics were wishy-washy, no doubt exists as to his sexual politics, which have nothing to do with mothers or women. Parker does not, if I remember correctly, use the term misogynist, but it often seems the right term.

The American section of the book details his conversion to the teachings of Vedanta. Particularly illuminating is the tussle arising from his willingness to publish on behalf of his Guru. Parker asks us to consider who would benefit more from the enterprise. But in typical fashion, just as we believe Isherwood is converted, he edges away. The reason is simply that there is one area where he has no doubts at all, his homosexuality: all other creeds must accommodate themselves to it. The account of his life in America is made up therefore of two threads: his love-life and his career as a writer. I have to confess that it is never very clear, even from such a detailed study as this, how Isherwood succeeds as a writer in this period, as his books receive little critical attention and do not sell in great numbers. It is only in middle age and beyond, with his involvement in script writing for
Hollywood and the various adaptations of his Berlin books, that he is financially secure. Isherwood displays that apparent absent-mindedness about financial affairs that only people with no real financial problems can have.

It is not until the publication of *Christopher and His Kind*—rather than the more explicit novel *A Single Man* (1964)—that Isherwood becomes a figurehead of gay liberation. Bearing in mind Isherwood’s hovering between real life and fiction, it is ironic that an autobiographical rewriting of the 1930s has greater impact than a novel, though the timing of the publication of the former, several years after the Stonewall riot and in the decade of gay rights, is surely responsible for this. At the same time, Isherwood had become an accomplished lecturer in English, now performing the role of an amiable old rogue still battling against the establishment, which was willing to let him play the game and pay him generously.

What, then, do we take out of this new biography? Parkers paints an Isherwood who is much more emotionally insecure than his suave appearance, manners and prose would have led us to believe. This is particularly the case in the longest and most important relationship of his life with the artist Don Bachardy, where both sexual and artistic jealousy sometimes poison their existence. A human Isherwood whose brushes with the police and terrible driving make for some of the few humorous incidents in the book: the best of these occurs when he believes he is suffering from anal bleeding; it turns out he has been eating a lot of beetroot! An Isherwood who becomes an incurable hypochondriac in later life. An Isherwood who is eventually reconciled with his mother, but less with his fellow writers. The second half of the book provides much new information, painstakingly pieced together, but ironically his American persona lives off the financial rewards and artistic reputation of the Europe that he emigrated so many thousands of miles to get away from.

What we also take out of this biography is a meticulous recreation of the close-knit circle of writers and artists. The fact that few of them are very likable and some rather despicable is the result and vindication of Parker’s “warts and all” research. To communicate the sensation of living in a different era, many reviews use the cliché “lovingly recreated,” but this would be a misnomer, because unlike Isherwood’s subjective Berlin camera, Parker’s approach is encyclopaedic. One minor criticism has to be made, which is that on a few occasions Parker analyses a photo in great detail without including it. A particularly frustrating example is the following:

> It was the first time since January 1939 that Auden, Isherwood and Spender, whose names were still and would always be linked had been together. The occasion was celebrated in a photo taken by Casker of the three writers standing together on a beach, just as they had for Stephen Spender’s “masturbatory camera” on Rügen Island in 1932. (566–67)

Parker, having shown us and analysed the Rügen Island photograph, emphasises the great importance of the second one, but we do not get to see it. That is surely the ultimate example of “I am a camera.”

What has Peter Parker’s camera been able to capture that previous studies have not? The immediate response to this question is often framed in terms like: “whereas author A believes ... author B finds that ...” However, the reason why I have stressed Parker’s meticulous, encyclopaedic approach is precisely to underline the fact that the presentation of such a massive amount of information is a policy designed to avoid being judgemental.
Therefore, the major contribution Parker makes, and a highly significant one it is too, is to clarify the ambiguities within the vast amount of quasi autobiographical material written by Isherwood; Isherwood’s major biographer and critic, I hope I have made clear, has been none other than Isherwood himself. That said, Parker’s access to vast amounts of previously inaccessible information makes it rather pointless to say he has improved on several earlier studies. It is worth pointing out that Parker does break with one strong tradition, a tradition that dominates such classic studies as Hynes (1976) or Page (1998), that of the generation. Both Hynes and Page imply that Auden and Isherwood’s friendship is part and parcel of the 1930s sense of generation. Parker demonstrates that the friendship never survived its transatlantic crossing. In addition, the widespread belief that that generation had strong political beliefs is shown—by Parker—to be debatable in the case of Auden and nonsensical in the case of Isherwood, as illustrated in his attempt to save Heinz. Isherwood’s status as a writer in the latter part of the twentieth century has risen with the increasing importance of gay studies in the academy: for example, Berg and Freeman (2001) won the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Studies. To compare a collection of essays with a biography is an unwise enterprise: they do not really have much in common, so I can simply conclude, in a rather non-committal way, that these two works complement each other, though as a work of scholarship and study of a twentieth-century writer, Parker’s biography has very few rivals.

Works Cited


Isherwood, Christopher 2000: Lions and Shadows. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.