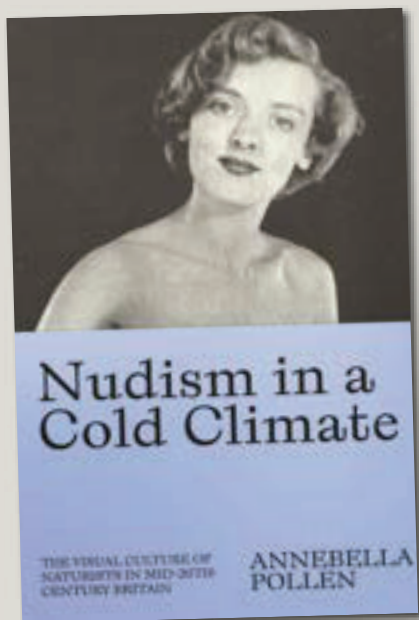


Entente cordiale

Author Anabella Pollen benefits from Anglo-French co-operation.



Not long after I released my 2022 book, *Nudism in a Cold Climate: The Visual Culture of Naturists in Mid-20th-Century Britain*, a review feature appeared in the French newspaper, *La Libération*.

Wittily subtitled *Tout Nus Mais Pas Bronzés* (*Everybody is Nude, but Nobody is Tanned*), the article was accompanied by a monochrome 1948

photograph from the book, showing pale, white-skinned diners in a nudist club restaurant in the south of England. The piece drew on one of the key themes of the book, namely nudism's relationship to national identity.

For the French, it was clearly curious, if not comical, that their neighbours across the channel, in a country known for grey skies and persistent rain, might seek the sun within its national borders, against all odds. This is especially the case when the climate and culture of France is sometimes described as a 'naturist's paradise' (to quote a recent exhibition on the subject in Marseille).

These were, of course, concerns I had signalled from the book's title onwards, which made play not only with the inclement temperatures of my foggy island, but also the hostile moral environment in which British nudism was established.

Attention

That article in *La Libération*, and consequently my book (featured in the April 2022 issue of H&E), came to the

attention of Paris-based film director David Caillon. As the editor-in-chief of a documentary series of shorts entitled *Gymnastique: La Culture sans Claquage* on the French TV channel Arte, he was on the lookout for interesting topics that would fit the theme, and got in touch.



The series aims to stretch the mind

Gymnastique is not meant to be taken literally, although the series aims to stretch the mind as it seeks out its eclectic mix of "lesser-known areas" and "singular stories." When I asked my publishers, At elier  ditions, for their thoughts, the Creative Director, a bilingual Canadian, told me that she grew up watching Arte; she knew it well and rated it highly. I said yes to David's invitation, and we hatched a plan.

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In summer 2023, on what just happened to be a bright and sunny day, David arrived at my house on the south coast of England with a cameraman and an alarming amount of gear. By the time the microphones, lighting and rigging were all in place in my small living room, I was rather penned into a corner. From there, however, I answered an hour's worth of rigorous questions about the history of nudism, its visual culture, and its shifting status in twentieth-century Britain.

Audiences

David was interested in the way that photography and film had long been used as promotional tools to recruit audiences (if not always participants) for nudist cultures. I talked through the way that nude bodies were represented first in health magazines, later in saucy postcards, and later again in Soho cinema. As I own a lot of nudist visual and material culture, my bookshelves became part of the scenery, and I was filmed flicking through early copies of *Health and Efficiency* on my sofa.

Our next stop was the White House in Surrey, a naturist club established in 1933. There we were greeted by naturist Nick Mayhew-Smith, a writer on spirituality and nature. This was the first time I had visited, and I was pleased to see (in the flesh) locations that were photographed by Bertram Park and Yvonne Gregory in the 1930s, and included as illustrations in my book.

I own a lot of nudist material

The club was well populated with nude sunbathers and pétanque players who kindly welcomed in the clothed filmmakers. I sat under the shade of a bougainvillea wearing a huge straw hat (my ginger, freckled complexion is completely unsuited to my subject of study) and I explored the well-appointed club house, with life drawings on the walls, a sprung dancefloor and licensed bar.

Access

With several hours of footage in hand, and access to as many visual sources

as I could provide him, David returned to France to turn the material into a film. The result, *Le Nudisme à la Britannique*, was released in February in French, with forthcoming subtitled versions in English, German, Italian, Polish and Spanish.



The film has a serious message

As per my book, it tells the story of nudism through a British frame, but it does so from a French perspective: cups of tea, pictures of the Queen, and liveried butlers feature as much as bare bodies. A century is covered in six tight minutes. Historic still photographs are animated in lively ways, between vintage footage from previous documentaries shot in naturist clubs in the 1950s and the more spurious nude cinema offerings of the 1960s.

Nick and I both speak to camera and blink in the sun, but we do so unclothed and clothed, respectively. At the White House, boules are tossed, and beer is quaffed. The final edit has a touch of *Carry On Camping* – to the uninitiated a British comedy that famously begins with a cinema screening of a 1958 naturist documentary – mixed with elements of the 1990s Channel 4 culture show, *Eurotrash*, where co-presenters Antoine de Caunes and Jean Paul Gaultier presented high-speed shorts on cross-channel curiosities to late-night British audiences.

So far, so silly, perhaps. But the film also has a serious message: social continuities prevail across the history of nudism, just as its communities and sites endure. The principles of bodily liberation and cultural experimentation that were the founding premises of the first British nudist camp in 1924 are still there in 2024, as is the fascination of non-nudists, and the perpetual threat of ridicule. For me, there is also a satisfying circularity. As a researcher of nudist periodicals, I was delighted when H&E featured my book on its pages. As a scholar of naturist documentaries, I now find myself part of the corpus that I study. ■

