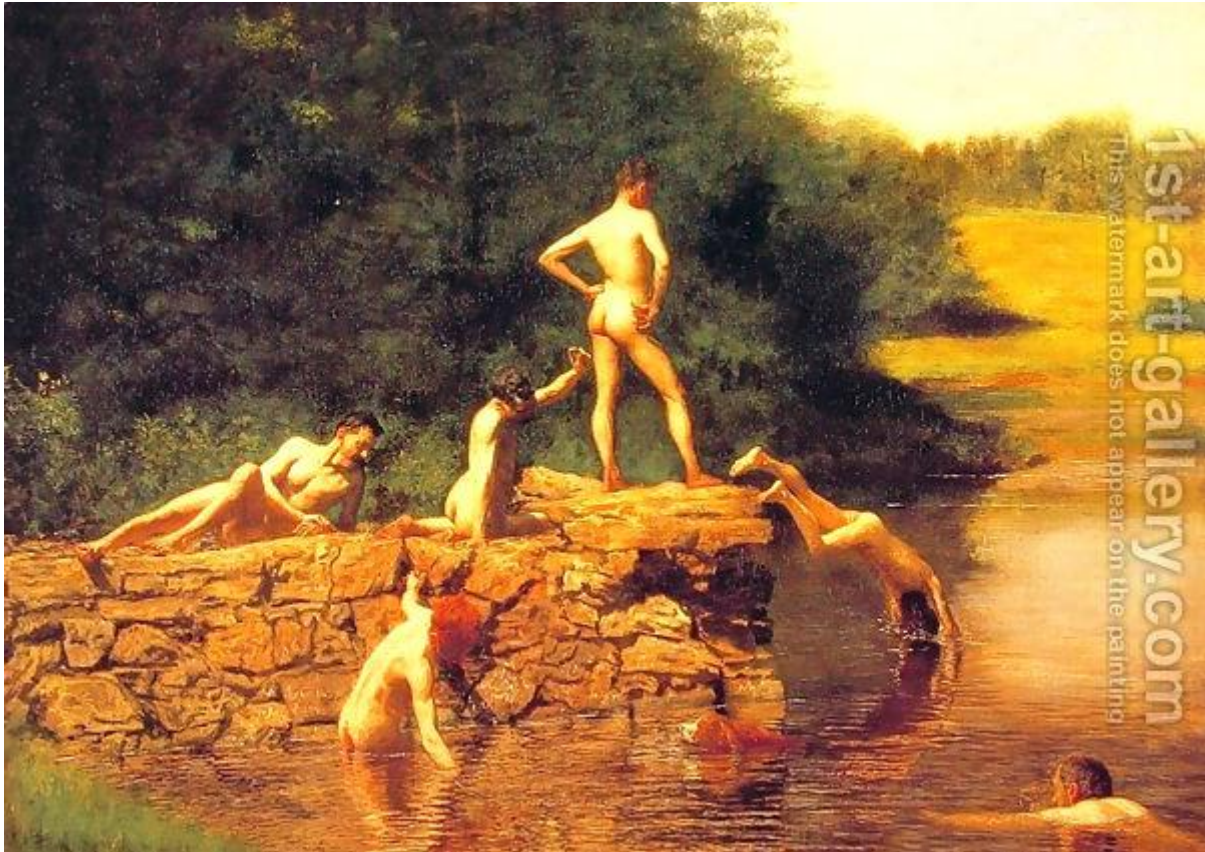


World's First Nudist Colony was in Thane

Charles Edward Gordon Crawford, a District and Sessions Judge in colonial India, founded The Fellowship of the Naked Trust in 1891, discovers Vishwas Kulkarni



My life was in a strange way that summer, the last summer of its kind there was ever to be. I was riding high on sex and self-esteem – it was my time, my belle époque – but all the while with a faint flicker of calamity, like flames around a photograph, something seen out of the corner of the eye.

– The Swimming Pool Library, Alan Hollinghurst, 1988

Queer Beginnings at Tulsi Lake and Matheran

The commune boasted of only three members: Charles Edward Gordon Crawford, an English widower, and Andrew and Kellogg Calderwood, the sons of a missionary. The club's motto was *Vincat Natura* (Let Nature Win). C.E.G. Crawford's pedigree as a civil servant in British

India was confirmed by the British Library's Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections in London:

“He does appear in a few editions of the India Office List. This was an annual list produced by the India Office that contains lists of officers and higher ranking civil service staff, including judges. In the 1894 edition, he is listed as a 3rd class Sessions Judge in Ratnagiri,” cited a reference specialist.

It is however the club's philosophical connect to the sepia-tinted beginnings of the queer movement in Victorian England that makes it more exotic: four recorded letters at the Sheffield Archives, exchanged between the founder of the nudist club and Edward Carpenter, a pioneering gay activist, reveal that The Fellowship of the Naked functioned in areas as far out as Matheran and even Tulsi Lake, a water body that still supplies Mumbai with h2o. In this correspondence, dated between 19 August 1891 and 5 June 1892, the founding father of nudism confessed to Edward Carpenter:

“Andrew Calderwood and I were up at Matheran having two days' holiday to spend naked from breakfast to evening. But that was only by shutting ourselves up tight in our room... Being indoors at our FNT meetings does not of course employ quite the same shutting up as it does in England. The room where we have “met” in this house is upstairs, lofty and spacious, and full of windows. In June, Andrew Calderwood I had a grand day. We went away to a bungalow in the Tulsi Lake without servants and spent from dinner time Saturday till five pm Sunday in nature's garb. Servants are the great difficulty, because they are everywhere. At Tulsi, where we were quite isolated, we were able to stroll about in the veranda and round the house. I am writing this in “uniform” and we have retired to a secluded room for the purpose of spending a few hours so.”

Dress Code

Outside of these three one lady was in conjunction with the club's ideals, but not its stipulations: "She is not prepared even to be an outside member 'on account of what people would think'," lamented Crawford in his letters. Her squeamishness may perhaps be justified. The club required members to go stark naked. It also required them to be plainspoken, when keen on sexual taboos, reticence was discouraged. Anyone could be admitted if nominated by two members. Clothes were banned from meetings, but accessories such as rings, eyeglasses and false teeth were permitted. Women had to wear their hair loose without ribbons, combs or hairpins. The use of rouge or powder was prohibited. Despite the radical nature of the club, sectarian and political discussion was forbidden.

Publicity Shy

On Crawford's end though there was fear, and even a subdued guilt. "I am perhaps an abomination of desolation, being with these, my heretical views, one of those grave and revered elders known as District and Sessions Judges. Hence my desire not to have my name blazed about," wrote the widower to the queer icon, requesting anonymity. It turns out that the trailblazing gay activist had travelled through India and Sri Lanka in 1890-91 and might have already known of this incipient nudist colony. He had penned a travelogue, *From Adam's Peak to Elephanta: sketches in Ceylon and India*, a manuscript of which he mailed the founder of the FNT; Crawford though was wary of any such publicity. "I am delighted with the extract from *Notes in Ceylon and India*, which I received with your ever welcome letter this morning. I think it is excellent and would make no change in it, except that I would ask that the words "officials even, strange as it may appear" should be omitted. You will think me unduly cautious – Calderwood says I am the most phenomenally cautious man he

ever came across – but the Government of India, being the meanest of mankind, are quite capable of calling upon every official in the service, to disavow membership of any such society, should what you say attract any public attention, which I hope it may,” warned Crawford.

Stripped to Nothing

The Fellowship of the Naked Trust was sadly a short-lived flash in the pan. In a year from its inception in 1891, Crawford remarried: during a vacation in Matheran, he found a woman, Florence Ethel Willis, who shared his democratic proclivities and was aware of his recreational ones.

She however did not express the candour of his erstwhile (deceased) spouse. Speaking of his first wife, Crawford wrote:

“Till I married I always supposed that shame or false modesty was so strong in clothed women...but to my surprise, when talking of being wrecked among savages and being forced to go stark naked like them, my wife said that that she would not mind a bit, every one about her being naked. I did not know Calderwood then – he was a child – and the FNT therefore did not exist, so she had no opportunity of practicing this.”

C.E.G. Crawford and Florence Ethel Willis tied the knot in August 1892, confirms Michael Farrar, an archivist at British Naturism, England’s leading nudist organization.

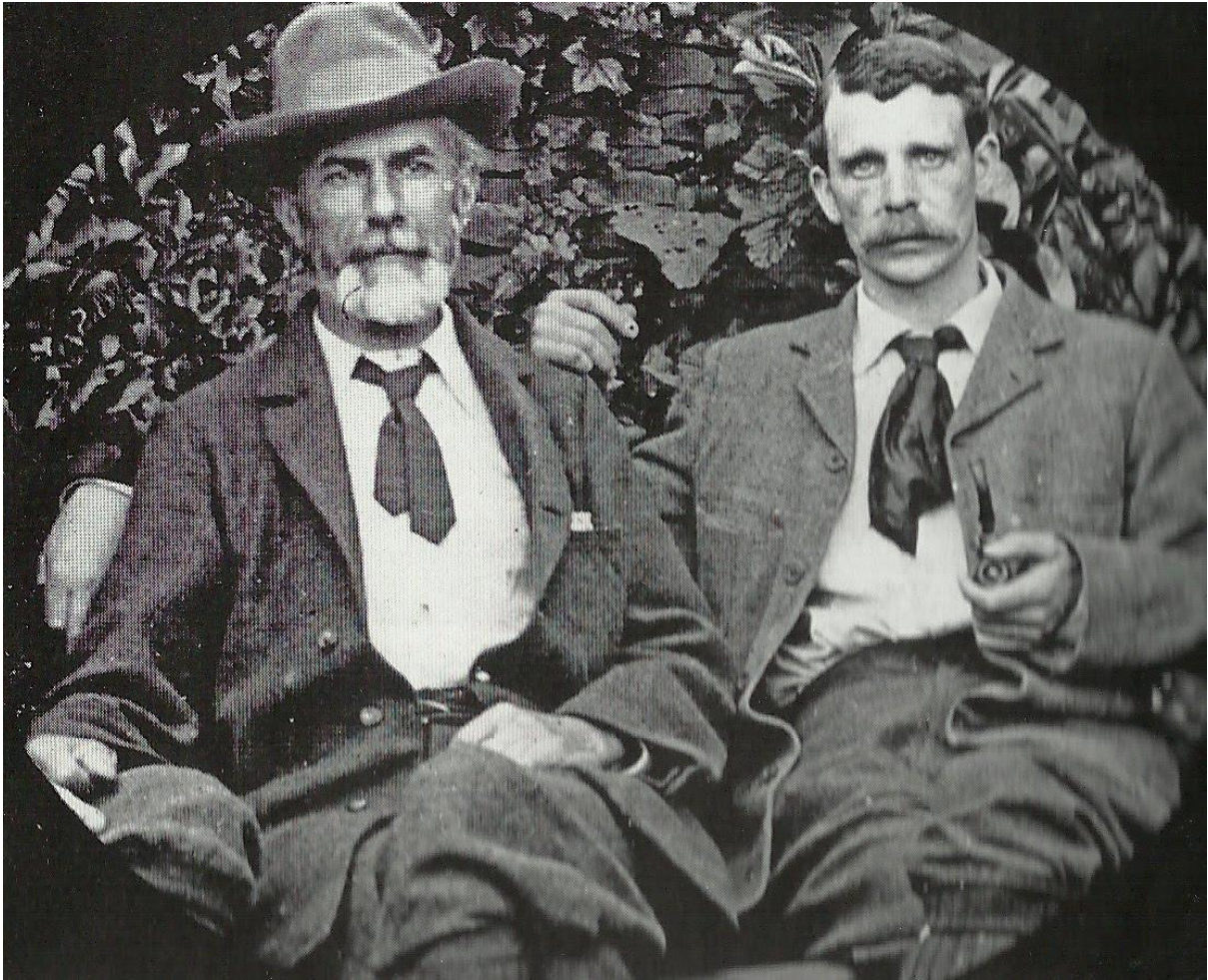
His son from the first marriage, Osbert Guy Stanhope Crawford, who was five at the time of the FNT’s inception, moved on to becoming a prominent archaeologist and author, but probably knew nothing of his father’s endeavor.

From the other two members of The Fellowship of the Naked Trust, Kellogg Calderwood moved to Burma, but he did manage to take a photograph of himself in “the uniform” of the FNT. “I have asked him if he can send you one. Kellogg is an amateur photographer, and I

am proud possessor of one of him, taken by himself in *puris naturalibus*,” boasted Crawford in his letter to Carpenter.

Andrew Calderwood eventually left the club, and was jobless for a while. “His father was a missionary and he would not be one. He is one of the unemployed. India is no place for men without definite work. I think he is going to British Columbia in March. Meanwhile he is spending the cold weather with his mother and sister at Umballa,” wrote Crawford.

Ambala (Haryana) is still a cantonment town in Independent India. Crawford was planning a six-month sabbatical in 1893 to visit England, hoping to meet Carpenter, “to making your acquaintance in the flesh.” This never happened: the founding father of naturism died on 4 May 1894, a fact confirmed by the 1895 edition of the India Office List at the British Library. Nudist colonies were also functional out of Vienna and Munich at around the same time, as per the letters exchanged between Crawford and Carpenter. But despite their mention in these, no written evidence of them exists.



(Top): The founder of the nudist colony wrote four recorded letters to Edward Carpenter (left), seen here with his long-term companion from the working class, George Merrill. Carpenter and Merrill met in 1881 and it was a relationship that lasted 47 years, until Merrill's death in 1928.

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