

Murray State University

From the Selected Works of Josh Adair

2013

"More than slightly mad": Beverley Nichols and the Merry Hall Trilogy."

Joshua G Adair



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/joshua-adair/3/>

‘More than slightly mad’: Beverley Nichols and the *Merry Hall* Trilogy

Joshua G. Adair

To cite this article: Joshua G. Adair, “‘More than slightly mad’: Beverley Nichols and the *Merry Hall* Trilogy’, *Assuming Gender* 6:1 (2017), pp. 11-30

To link to this article: <http://rebrand.ly/assum8c4a>

Published online: 22 Dec 2017

Submit your article to this journal: <http://www.assuminggender.com/p/submissions.html>

View related articles: <http://www.assuminggender.com/p/issues.html>

‘More than slightly mad’: Beverley Nichols and the *Merry Hall* Trilogy

Joshua G. Adair

Murray State University

This essay analyses Beverley Nichols’s *Merry Hall* trilogy—frequently dismissed as ‘garden writing’—as an often overlooked form of queer literature. Using Jack Halberstam’s theories about queer failure, this essay examines the ways in which the now relatively obscure author was able to commodify himself and his lifestyle for a specific audience. In so doing, the author argues, he attempted to further the cause of queer acceptance in the process, even to the detriment of what some consider could have been a more important or worthwhile career.

Keywords: Beverley Nichols, Queer Theory, garden writing, mid-century England, domesticity

Bright Young Thing

A world in which homosexuality is criminalised requires queers—especially those who wish to exit the closet—to develop alternate, slightly obfuscated, methods of coming out. For the once-acclaimed English author Beverley Nichols (1898-1983), this establishment of self was accomplished by way of conspicuous consumption; if he could not announce his queerness outright, he would let his lifestyle, self-marketing, and self-styling as an effeminate queer do the work for him. On occasion, these pronouncements take on a literal air, as in the following passage from *Are They the Same at Home?* (1927) describing an awkward lunch with the author George Moore:

I cast a despairing glance at the omelette. The parlourmaid stood there like a waxen image. For her I had no feelings, because, after all, she was not an omelette. She was not something light as air, born for a moment only, to be seized and devoured while

the bloom was on her. She was just ordinary flesh and blood, whereas the omelette was a sacred mixture of butter and eggs.¹

Even before submerging readers into the content of the collection, Nichols publicly announces that he prioritises satiating himself with the pleasures of food over indulging in the delights of devouring a woman. Heterosexual desire, he establishes, fails to consume him—despite the voracious appetites that come to characterise his remarkably queer existence.

If Nichols's name does not spark recognition, that may be due to the fact that the years have not been terribly kind to him. In his heyday, Nichols authored over fifty books—with many of them reaching bestseller status and some critical acclaim—as well as numerous plays, musical scores, newspaper and magazine columns, and film and television scripts. He also acted in several films, presented on BBC radio, and featured regularly in the society columns of the day. He was an interesting and popular writer who regularly kept company with Rebecca West, Noël Coward, W. Somerset Maugham, and Evelyn Waugh, to name a few. His work traversed varied terrain from politics in *Verdict on India* (1944) to children's stories like *The Tree that Sat Down* (1945). Ann Lovejoy observes, 'his books [...] belong utterly to their period. Few of them read as well now as they did in their day, when Nichols's bons mots were widely quoted and his exploits followed like those of film stars or politicians'.² As one of the original 'Bright Young Things', Nichols made a splash in many milieux over his long life, often through self-promotion. Today, however, much of his writing has gone out of print, and fashion, and readers who recognise his name attribute their awareness to his so-called 'gardening' trilogies, *Allways* (1930s) and *Merry Hall* (1950s), which have been continuously in print since their original publication and continue to attract audiences today. Erica Brown argues that his loss of stature as a serious literary figure had little to do with his talents as a writer, suggesting that 'Nichols effectively destroyed his own critical reputation through becoming someone who could and would write almost anything for money'.³

¹ Beverley Nichols, *Are They the Same at Home?* (London: George H. Doran, 1927), p. 8.

² Beverley Nichols, *Merry Hall* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951), p. vii. Further references to this book are given parenthetically in the text.

³ Erica Brown, 'The Rise and Fall of the Original "Bright Young Thing": Beverley Nichols, *Crazy Pavements* (1927), and Popular Authorship', *The Review of English Studies* 66 (2015), 144-163 (p. 144).

Unravelling the conundrum of Nichols’s decline into relative obscurity from a place of some importance, however, demands a somewhat more complex explanation. While Brown’s point is certainly significant and no doubt a major factor in Nichols’s lack of critical regard these days, queerphobia and genre assignments and valuations, I contend, also contributed to his erasure in significant ways. For much of his career and life as a public figure—as both Bryan Connon, his biographer and friend, and Brown have established—Nichols’s work was once considered serious and important.⁴ Brown’s assessment attributes this critical dissipation to Nichols’s lack of avant-garde, high modernist aesthetics, as his novels were often categorised as ‘middlebrow’ as a way of dismissing them as irrelevant and even feminine.⁵ She notes, ‘He is now known, if remembered at all, as a columnist for *Woman’s Own*, a writer of mystery novels, gardening and children’s books and as a “professional cat-lover”’. It is a far cry from the highly-praised and promising novelist of the 1920s.⁶ In spite of this rather dour-sounding analysis of his work, Brown believes as I do that

The dismissal of Nichols’ novel [*Crazy Pavements*] as middlebrow vulgarization, despite its freshness, wit, unusually sympathetic depictions of gay men and complex attitude to its subject, reveals just how hostile a view was taken of accessible fiction and prolific popular journalism by many critics from the 1920s onwards. Beverley Nichols, who had such high hopes for his literary reputation, is a writer who deserves further attention in the critical study of the denigrated middlebrow of the twentieth century.⁷

While Brown limits her analysis to a single novel, her critique can easily be extended to many of Nichols’s works, including the *Merry Hall* trilogy that I examine here.

In order to pave the way for this discussion, it bears mentioning before we proceed that queerphobia likely also played a major role in Nichols’s so-called failure to become an Evelyn Waugh, a Carl Van Vechten, or some other literary luminary of the era. Nichols’s queerness, though unconcealed, rendered him vulnerable in a number of ways both legal and social. Waugh, for example, would reappear

⁴ Bryan Connon, *Beverley Nichols: A Life* (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 2000), p. 97–99; 134; 176. Brown, p. 145.

⁵ Brown, pp. 145–46.

⁶ Brown, p. 146.

⁷ Brown, p. 163.

periodically throughout Nichols's life and whenever they would meet, he went out of his way to pounce upon what he considered Nichols's effeminate interests or personality characteristics. Connon quotes Nichols as saying, 'I felt as if he thought of me as a figure of fun from one of his novels. I not only wrote for the popular press which he apparently despised but I was also sentimental about dogs, not to mention cats'.⁸ On another occasion Waugh offered a snide remark about Nichols's 'little pieces' for 'housewives', denigrating his writing for *Woman's Own*—belittling his femininity and his need to earn an income simultaneously.⁹ Waugh was not alone in targeting Nichols in a misogynistic mode—for indeed, at least part of the literary and society establishment at the time treated him as a woman or at least womanly—others joined in, too. In 1934, for example, a satiric send-up of his *A Thatched Roof, Mon Repos*, was published by one 'Nicholas Bevel'.¹⁰ Nichols was a target because of his queerness and because he failed to live up to the masculine ideal of modernism.

In addition, Connon observes, 'It infuriated Beverley that he could not write honestly about his sexual tastes. He did produce a homosexual romance [...] but so crafted as to avoid public awareness of what it was really about'.¹¹ In turning to garden writing, then, Nichols may have found a way to be more honest in his self-depiction—all while retreating behind the mask of so-called fiction—and to garner interest and support from a sympathetic audience: catering to women. Throughout his life, Nichols formed intense friendships with women and seemed to view them as natural allies as they tended to avoid the criticisms and humiliations men so often levelled at him. This 'failure' then—to measure up as a masculine male, to produce appropriately masculine work—prompted him to pursue alternate avenues for expression that, ironically, ensured a long life for some of his work.

Due to the fact that Nichols's career and his work are so often framed as examples of a failure of masculinity, squandered potential, and/or misdirected energies, I opt to analyse his *Merry Hall* trilogy through the lens of J. Jack Halberstam's ideas about queer failure. This lens allows me to examine the ways in which Nichols was able to commodify himself and his lifestyle for a specific audience and further the cause of queer acceptance in the process, even to the detriment of

⁸ Connon, p. 245.

⁹ Connon, p. 230.

¹⁰ Connon, p. 184.

¹¹ Connon, p. 98.

what some consider could have been a more important or worthwhile career. I should pause here, too, and note that this study represents a continuation of my interest in Nichols’s work. I have previously written about his dedication to aesthetics, his role in the tradition of queer writing, and his work as demonstrating minority stress (with Rebekah Goemaat).¹² Halberstam’s work fits perfectly alongside Nichols’s because it aims to be disruptive, irreverent, even delinquent. Halberstam refuses to follow entrenched disciplinary rules or select only mutually agreed-upon canonical material for analysis. He asserts,

Here we can think about *low theory* as a mode of accessibility, but we might also think about it as a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory.¹³

I turn specifically to this mode of queer theory because I believe it suits Nichols’s work best; disregarding the content and style of his work simply because bookstores shelve it with the garden books and ‘serious’ academics ignore it does not diminish its ongoing impact or inherent value. Much as Halberstam turns to oft-dismissed Pixar films to learn about the nature of queer relationships, for example, I seek to illuminate how a ‘failed’ queer author fashions Trojan Horse texts to influence unsuspecting readers, and stake claim to a space for the diminished and dismissed under a cloak of trivial frivolity. I see Nichols’s texts working as ‘alternative political formations’, to borrow Halberstam’s formulation:

The history of alternative political formations is important because it contests social relations as given and allows us to access traditions of political action that, while not necessarily successful in the sense of becoming dominant, do offer models of contestation, rupture, and discontinuity for the political present. These histories also identify potent avenues of failure, failures that we might build upon.¹⁴

It is my intention here, then, to examine how Nichols’s frequently dismissed and/or disregarded works—his failures—represent rupture, resistance, and resilience.

¹² See bibliography entries for Joshua Adair.

¹³ J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 16.

¹⁴ Halberstam, p. 19.

Get Your Hands Dirty

Nichols's gardening trilogies—which were marketed primarily to women—actually offer very little practical gardening instruction.¹⁵ Instead, they deliver a charming glimpse into the world of a flamboyant, self-styled aristocrat intent upon outdoing everyone around him with his extensive renovations and restorations. As a queer precursor to Martha Stewart and her ilk, Nichols chronicles the travails of purchasing historic homes with extensive gardens and recuperating them in high style—typically without any reliable stream of funds to do so, as in this case from *Sunlight on the Lawn* (SL hereafter):

The whole of the ground must be concreted. I have put this sentence in italics because—well, if *you* suddenly decided that a large portion of your garden would have to be covered in concrete, in order to support a mountain of earth which was not there, in the hope of growing quantities of shrubs which did not, as yet, exist—you might be inclined to put it in italics, too. [...] It is an example of putting the cart before the horse, and that is how I happen to prefer to operate.¹⁶

Nichols refuses to concern himself with practicality or anything that might be regarded as 'common sense', which here might also be characterised as belonging to a straight sensibility. Throughout the *Merry Hall* trilogy, as we will shortly see, he takes great pains to make clear to his reader that his ideals rest a great distance from the bourgeois respectability ensconced in the nuclear heterosexual family. Instead, he hierarchises style and stylisation—particularly as he and his surroundings embody them—as the greatest value for a life well lived. Although taking such a stance risks being dismissed as trifling and impractical, it also positions Nichols as a daring deviant capable of forging new modes of living.

'Being taken seriously', Halberstam reminds us in *The Queer Art of Failure*, 'means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people'.¹⁷ Nichols defies gravity repeatedly in favour of self-parody and outright silliness; in doing so he endears himself in a manner that renders him somehow powerful still, even though logic

¹⁵ Connon, p. 131.

¹⁶ Beverley Nichols, *Sunlight on the Lawn* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956) p. 140–41. Further references to this book are given parenthetically in the text.

¹⁷ Halberstam, p. 6.

suggests it should not. His advice, by any measure, is rarely well-considered or risk averse. It is, however, seductive: appealing to his primarily female and queer audience, Nichols relieves his readers of the oppressive heteronormative standards so frequently enforced by fathers, husbands, and other masculine authority figures. In their place, they are met with an authority of a totally different kind; he remains very much in charge and certain of his authority, but he offers a variety of self-indulgent, anti-authoritarian advice that resonates with readers and encourages quiet rebellions in household economies. Forget practicality, Nichols counsels: let’s break the rules and have some fun instead. As a result, he endears himself to readers and then indoctrinates them to his decidedly queer perspective simultaneously. While his peculiar worldview crops up frequently throughout his oeuvre, the incident of the urns, chronicled early in *Merry Hall* (MH hereafter), establishes it most clearly:

So I hurried out to the kitchen to tell Gaskin [his factotum *cum* butler] that I was going out to find some urns.

‘Urn?’ he said, with singular lack of enthusiasm. ‘Whatever for?’ [...]

He sniffed. ‘There’s a hundred and one things we want more than urns. [...] You ought to be putting first things first.’ I told Gaskin that I was very sorry, and made soothing suggestions about going up to Harrod’s for the day, and then I hurried out, got in the car, and drove off. (66)

In Nichols’s world, beauty comes first and always at fabulous expense; he must have what is rare, exceptional, and largely unattainable. Through this behaviour, Nichols lodges a sustained political critique of the heteronormative order that—especially in those post-WWII days—counselled financial prudence, circumspection, and practicality. Such drudgery, he repeatedly asserts, is the province of the narrows and the straights—those whose edicts he evades whenever possible. In this way, he manifests that resistance Halberstam calls ‘alternative political formations’. The story of Nichols’s relationship with Merry Hall is one such formation and failure.

In the same year that the last book in the series, *Sunlight on the Lawn*, appeared, Nichols sold the mansion and its grounds, which he had owned for ten years. For that decade, he styled himself as a queer modern version of the kind of ‘Lord of the Manor’ who would have originally presided over the place in the

eighteenth century. He did so by configuring his household in ways completely counter to all heteronormative logic: its inhabitants, staff, and servants were all male and, with the exception of the gardener Oldfield whom he inherited with the property, queer. He lived there with his partner, Cyril Butcher, in complete openness, though Butcher is only sporadically mentioned in the books themselves. Despite Nichols's enviable income from his investments and creative endeavours, he never made enough to support his defiantly lavish lifestyle. This is unsurprising considering it perennially involved ever-increasingly ostentatious displays of taste and artistry—though the cost itself was never highlighted as being of value in the way it might be today. Nichols's biographer, Bryan Connon, notes repeatedly that Nichols lived above his means and overspent at every turn, never fully recuperating his expenditures even upon the sale of the property.¹⁸ While he enmeshed himself in that phase of his life, Nichols enjoyed a newfound power in his parvenu position; the stature and history of Merry Hall afforded him a bully pulpit to proselytise for a queer conception of consumption that lauded beauty, grace, and creativity as alternative life modes—even if they cost more than even their prophet could afford.

It bears mentioning here, too, that Nichols financed the lifestyle he was hawking by selling himself, in effect. After all, his autofictional works invited readers to see his life as 'for sale', in the sense that they were buying his books to capture some part of their author and the lifestyle he so carefully crafted in spite of its punishing expense. He continued to produce these slightly fictionalised accounts of his exploits at Merry Hall because readers could not get enough—and still cannot—of Nichols the man rendered object. Whereas most readers could likely never use their own connections and talents to approximate even a pale version of Nichols's accomplishments, they were able to participate through the purchase of his works. Those purchases, in turn, facilitated his ability to objectify himself further for their pleasure as well as his own. In this complex relationship, Nichols comes to operate as a type of commodified queer who bolsters the ego of a certain type of reader eager to affiliate with such authority. One can easily imagine Nichols's hyperbolic, even caricature-like, pronouncements feeding readers' sense of stereotypes even as they shore up their own less firm sense of taste and style. For upwardly mobile readers, or those who at least harboured such pretensions, Nichols's pronouncements become the man himself, available for purchase and promotion at one's nearest bookseller.

¹⁸ Connon, p. 258.

As he endeavoured to attain ever higher standards of living, they followed suit—always with the understanding that the inimitable author would forever best them.

Collecting, or ‘I would try to live up to those chairs’

In *Laughter on the Stairs* (1953; *LS* hereafter) Nichols announces, ‘It is arguable, that ownership, in matters of taste, is nine-tenths of education. If you possess even one beautiful object it teaches you more, by its constant proximity, than a hundred visits to museums’.¹⁹ Of course to read about the kind of objects Nichols owns, as well as those he ardently pursues, is to discover that there are objects and then there are *objects*. In order to position himself as a queer authority, it is imperative that he ascend into realms ethereal and relatively inaccessible. In other words, he fails rather spectacularly—and very much on purpose, I would posit—at offering the kind of advice that makes his lifestyle liveable. He conceives queerness as authority and difference; he wishes to celebrate and protect both while making perfectly clear that they are not accessible to everyone. At the same time, he presents advice in his work that suggests that imitation proves a worthwhile endeavour for those with designs upon self-improvement, selling himself and his informed—and abundant—advice as appropriate vehicles to purchase such improvements. This conception of queer performance is at odds with the contemporary world’s more egalitarian sense of ordinariness when it comes to sexual and gender difference, but strains of this exceptionalism still persist in the realms of more stereotypically queer professions like interior decorating, hairstyling, and garden designing.

Philip Core argues in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* that through individuals like Somerset Maugham, Cecil Beaton, Ivor Novello, and Noël Coward, ‘we can pinpoint the sort of camp the English upper classes adore: an outrageous but unprosecutable arbiter elegantarium who bullies the world [...] into accepting a homosexual’s view of how it should dress, act, entertain’.²⁰ Nichols, a contemporary and close friend of the queers Core lists, exemplifies these very characteristics and played a significant role in shaping and furthering the stereotypical conception of queer men as effete aesthetes dedicated to stylish living

¹⁹ Beverley Nichols, *Laughter on the Stairs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), p. 129. Further references to this book are given parenthetically in the text.

²⁰ Phillip Core, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 83.

reminiscent of earlier aristocratic models. Where these men part ways with aristocratic models of authority, however, is in the realms of commerce and capital. Each sold his authority in one form or another, be it in a play, film, photograph or book. They style themselves as commodities to be captured and copied—but always at a price. Nichols fashions himself as the *arbiter elegantarium* to be imitated—not to mention obeyed—by his adoring readers, after paying the cover charge to contribute to his upkeep. Through his use of self-deprecating humour, cutting wit, and, above all, conspicuous consumption, Nichols markets his queer sensibilities and style to an unsuspecting audience, rendering himself and others like him more palatable and indispensable to readers hungry for an education about securing the outer trappings of social prominence. While he offered himself up as their upper-class conduit, it came coupled with unquestionable queerness.

His own trappings, he initially asserts with faux self-deprecation, present as rather dishabille: ‘I had so little furniture that it was funny. [...] I did what most people would have done—I bought junk’. He continues,

For the drawing-room I got a worm-eaten walnut William and Mary bureau, which was rather more William than Mary, and some dark red curtains. In front of this I placed the Empire settee, which might have looked all right if Madame Recamier had been lying on it, straining her dorsal muscles and smirking at posterity. As it was, it looked lost and it swore at William and Mary. (LS 67-68)

In his deflections about his allegedly pauperish possessions, he somehow still manages to conjure up the great painter Jacques-Louis David, as well as several English monarchs. Though his pose suggests he takes a dim view of such down-at-heel furnishings, it seems quite unlikely that his many of his readers could summon such illustrious illusions in describing their sofas and artwork. He endeavours to degrade the merits of his movables further by introducing Bob R., his flamboyantly queer friend whom he implies is also a Rothschild: ‘Riddled with worm, my dear. And you know what happens when you get *worm*....’ [...] ‘No, my dear, it is *not* ormolu. It is brass. And one of its legs is missing [...] *Never* buy junk. It never pays’ (LS 70). These lectures, of course, serve not only to justify the purchases of more extravagant, high-quality *objets*, but they also send a clear message about these men: ‘we are not like you. You should wish to emulate us, but you will never *be* us’. Along with such assertions comes a drive to establish superiority and essential difference by way of

aesthetic sensitivity that renders such men indispensable, if not entirely comprehensible. What they know, their work implies, can only be partially learned; the rest is inborn. Nevertheless, their adoring audiences play a vital role in this construction of authority and difference. Without them, at least in Nichols's case, his carefully crafted life could not be financed.

Finances loom large throughout Nichols's work, which not only lends humour but may also establish a point of shared experience between him and his readers, who likely have also experienced a lack of funds at some point or another. His money troubles, like everything about him, are larger than life. He markets his own impractical and spendthrift nature as a highly desirable commodity totally at odds with the world as most of his readers—then and now—know it. His assertions assault the logic of heterosexual adulthood, which prescribes judicious money management and a hearty dose of self-denial when it comes to indulgence of any variety, but especially in matters of materialism. In post-war England, frugality functioned as a *modus vivendi* for most; the luxury of gratuitously gratifying one's every desire reads as dangerous and highly nonconformist. It also renders luxury libidinal, signalling a decidedly queer failure to direct erotic energy to a human subject rather than some antique inanimate object. He repeatedly makes clear that he does not *do* as others must: 'If you have only just enough money to buy a bed, a chair, a table and a soup-plate, you should buy none of these squalid objects; you should immediately pay the first instalment on a Steinway grand' (MH 67). In this passage, Nichols's declarations violate norms; traditional knowledge is challenged and disregarded. The axiom he cites stands in as an exemplar of the sort of so-called common-sense logic that characterises heterosexuality; its foolproof sensibility proves unassailable. And yet, Nichols does not endeavour to assimilate into the hegemonic epistemology this axiom epitomises; instead he relegates such believers to the realms of the cheap and drab, who he casts as capable of only insignificant victories. As a result, he draws himself as an illegible, illogical figure in the capitalist-heterosexual world in which he lives, offering a playful counternarrative of feminine indulgence designed to confound the 'knowledge' his readers likely taken for granted. In Halberstam's words, 'Capitalist logic [which is also 'straight logic'] casts the homosexual as inauthentic and unreal, as incapable of proper love and unable to make proper connections between sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption'.²¹ Nichols's

²¹ Halberstam, p. 95.

work, on this score, appears to concur with all but the final analysis; his refusal to give way to this naturalised 'logic' sets him in clear opposition to established hierarchies and presents new possibilities for queer culture.

To close this section, I would like to turn to one last example of Nichols's failure to live up to the entrenched masculine/capitalist/heterosexual order. Ironically, this episode centres upon an inheritance—a traditionally male rite and privilege in England—that he celebrates for enriching his aesthetic life rather than focusing upon their inherent value. His eccentricity in this regard once again separates him from traditional masculinity and highlights his disregard—distaste, even—for a life lived in obeisance to a balance sheet. He introduces his inheritance of four walnut Daniel Marot chairs made in 1695—which come from a male friend, rather than a family member as they might in traditional society—with great hyperbole:

If one were to say that one's life had been radically changed by a set of walnut chairs, the statement might seem precious. It is the sort of thing that aesthetes used to say in the 'nineties. That does not worry me much. [...] Anyway, my life was changed by these chairs; it was changed in the sense that it was both widened and balanced and given a surer sense of direction. (*LS* 127-28)

In this passage Nichols presents his inheritance as anchoring his life and the validity of his pursuits. By literally owning a piece of history, he positions himself as securing access to narrate tradition and power, though not with a traditional status marker of rank and wealth.

Nichols's wealth takes the form of exquisitely carved chairs that, while undoubtedly valuable, are vaunted for their sheer beauty. By owning them, he possesses tangible evidence of his worthiness to participate in the life of museum-worthy objects that have survived many lifetimes longer than his, exemplifying a brand of taste and privilege that someone of his sort—at least according to the law criminalising queers—ought not have any right to possess. He heightens his cathexis with these chairs as he once again invokes the 1890s, and especially Oscar Wilde:

After the chairs had arrived [...] I made a vow. The vow was that somehow or other, cost what it may, I would try to live up to those chairs. Again, that sounds like the 'nineties and I am unrepentant. To try to 'live up to' any beautiful, whether it is a Greek vase or a slow movement by Mozart, is a most worthy and moral aim; if beauty

is in your head, if even a fragment of perfection abides in you, it acts as a standard to which you may constantly refer, even if the reference is subconscious. (LS 128-29)

Here we find a clear proclamation of Nichols’s queer effeminacy as it collides with his conspicuous consumption: while its attainment may be costly—prohibitively, even unsustainably so—he lauds such possessiveness as a *modus operandi* based squarely in achieving a transcendence that can only be catalyzed by close interaction with sublime beauty. His consumption is, without question, conspicuous; it is not, however, based in asserting dominance via spending power.

Money is an afterthought here—which is the reason Nichols cannot ultimately keep hold of Merry Hall despite brisk book sales—but the compensation for that failure of practicality may, in the end, be the comfort of knowing he has furthered the creative cause of the ideal of beauty. He makes this case multiple times in the trilogy:

Those chairs altered my life. By their elegance, their assurance, and their chastity, they were a silent reproof to everything [...] including myself. I was not sufficiently elegant; I was not sufficiently assured; and we will skip the rest. But those chairs did persuade me, at least, to try. It is very foolish to laugh at the memory of Oscar Wilde, vowing to live up to his blue china. If he had kept that vow, he would not have had so intimate an acquaintance with Reading Gaol. (MH 22)

Once again, Nichols returns to objects, which elsewhere he calls ‘a corrective to excess’, as models for enlightenment and inspiration (LS 129). He also objectifies himself by nominating inanimate objects as his competition. In his estimation, these are not mere objects, nor is this the base practice of materialism; rather, these are manifestations of artistry, imagination, and possibility. As he draws their lives, these chairs—and all artistic objects, by extension—possess the power to educate, inspire, and apparently, chastise one into better habits of behaviour. In fact, they even evince a sexuality—though he asserts it goes unacted upon by citing their ‘chastity’—established to reproach his own libidinal excesses, which are well documented by Connon: ‘homosexual sex of the most violent kind was a necessity to him, and became more so as he grew older’.²² And while the parallels he draws here with Wilde may seem unkind (and perhaps they are), as one prone to taking similar risks,

²² Connon, p. 212.

Nichols's argument seems to be not that wild desires, or even actions, are wrong, but that how one handles the public presentation of such wild(e)ness means everything. If it is possible for a chair to teach restraint, it appears Nichols learned that lesson sufficiently well enough to evade Wilde's fate, though he was guilty of similar crimes according to the law of the time.

Nichols could not, however, successfully evade all laws and strictures of his era. One of the drearier aspects of the 1950s, which heavily influences his estimation of the decade as 'less worthy', is the sheer expense of maintaining a lifestyle driven by beauty. His audacity at attempting to replicate a queer-inflected version of the eighteenth century made an important splash that continues to reverberate even today as his work finds new readers, but it proved unsustainable. Loss, Nichols's work insinuates, proves inevitable; just as failure (to measure up as a traditionally masculine man, to sustain and retain what one has created) also proves unavoidable. The important part is creating beauty from what one has collected—like the Marot chairs—and recognising the genealogy of that beauty as removed from the individual in its ability to persist. To achieve such splendour and then move on, Nichols's work establishes, dismantles the heterosexist logic that victory can only be claimed when it is secured in permanence for its creator; after all, when Nichols left the meticulously beautified mansion and its grounds, he took the chairs that inspired the undertaking with him to two more houses and gardens in need of his magic. Today, I imagine those chairs—and the remainder of his artistic, rarefied collection—continue to work their magic elsewhere, just as Nichols would wish them to.

Producing, or [Re:] Produce to Consume

Produce and production figure prominently in Nichols's gender construction throughout the *Merry Hall* trilogy. Just as he directs his desire towards an omelette rather than a parlourmaid in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay, his consumption is perpetually conspicuous in its incongruity. From the outset, we learn that Merry Hall features an unrivalled kitchen garden that draws his neighbours' envy in those times of austerity. In a letter from his soon-to-be friend and rival, Emily Kaye, we are provided a revealing glimpse about the fecundity of the site:

I am a vegetarian, with only a quite small garden, which is entirely given over to flowers. (One *must* have one's flowers—but I am sure I need not remind *you* of that!) This means that I am at the mercy of my local greengrocer [...]. Might I therefore ask if

we could come to a little arrangement? I happened to be passing Merry Hall the other day and ventured to peep through the hedge, and I noticed that the kitchen garden was *brimming* with the most wonderful vegetables [...] Might I be allowed to purchase some from you? It would be most convenient to me, and I dare hope that it might also be helpful to you. (MH 61-2)

Far from delighting at the suggestion, Nichols remarks that he feels she ‘had a damned cheek’ to make such a request (MH 63). He formulates multiple responses to decline her offer—though none appear to have any real merit—until he finally settles upon lack of fuel to deliver the goods as the excuse not to share his bounty. Figuratively speaking, the exchange—which transpires between a single man and a single woman—resembles a rather strange courting correspondence in which Ms Kaye feels Nichols out for his willingness to treat her as an ersatz spouse entitled to his produce. It also sets Emily apart from the traditional order in her singleness and vegetarian identity; she too lives outside the established order by having failed to find a husband or a taste for beef. Furthermore, she lacks the heterosexist practicality that would mandate the planting of vegetables for sustenance over indulging one’s desire for beauty as exemplified in her utterly floral garden. The fruits and vegetables of Nichols’ lands are not for ladies, a fact he goes to great lengths to establish.

Ironically, the kitchen garden’s offspring arrives in such abundance that Nichols and his all-male household cannot begin to consume it all: ‘The kitchen garden began to get on my nerves. There were battalions of leeks and cauliflowers and sprouts, and enough lettuces to supply a rabbit warren, and so many sorts of kale that it made one dizzy’ (MH 82–3). Practical production, which here bears an uncanny connection to a rumination on reproduction, holds no interest for Nichols. While he makes clear that he benefits from this produce, he proudly proclaims, ‘Here was a gardening genius [Oldfield, the gardener], and all I was getting was barrowloads of leeks, when what I really wanted was bunches of lilies’ (MH 83). Rather than focus on growing what nourishes and sustains—let alone sharing it with others who could benefit as well—Nichols laments his gardener’s focus upon practicality and pragmatism. To most readers, Nichols insistence upon floral folly reads as little more than sheer stupidity, but there is more at work here. His impracticality presents as a failure—of responsibility, of generosity, of charitability, even—but it also demonstrates his refusal to adhere to a heteronormative order. Halberstam asserts we can see ‘failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and

discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent'.²³ Whereas it is tempting to construe Nichols's withholding, non-consummating position as merely stingy or even mean-spirited, it is also possible to conceive it as a pointed move wherein he denies his obligation to provide for a woman. He refuses the social obligation to be placed in the role of provider and protector, thus short-circuiting one well-established social imperative based in not only sex, but also social class. In doing so, he presents the possibility of one gender performance that places his own needs—in this case the beauty of lilies—over the obligation of service and charity.

In this position, Nichols decries common sense to proclaim a space for himself that operates on alternate logics and with divergent ideologies akin to those proposed by Halberstam:

Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique.²⁴

These features of queer 'common sense' could not be clearer in Nichols's work. He refuses to conform to mainstream concepts of masculinity by forever focusing upon the aesthetic and the realm of beauty. He lacks all practicality when it comes to finances. In fact, rather than saving and investing the money he earns from his readers' purchases, he spends it on aesthetically pleasing, impractical objects, the procurement of which become anecdotes for their amusement. His lifestyle is reproductive only in the sense that he sees to the growth of countless flowers, fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Rather than share that productivity beyond his household, though, he offers excuses and sidesteps what most of us would consider a clear responsibility to share. Furthermore, rather than attempt to earn a profit from selling his produce, he actively eschews the market and his potential earning power. Ultimately, he presents the entire scenario of being asked to share sustenance as the

²³ Halberstam, p. 88.

²⁴ Halberstam, p. 89.

height of impropriety on Emily’s part, emerging as a champion of beauty over practicality once more.

As it turns out, Miss Emily proves a worthy adversary for Nichols, though she too has given over her garden to producing flowers rather than the vegetables she wishes someone else to deliver to her. In a second letter, she harangues him saying, ‘It was so very unfortunate that we were unable to come to some arrangement [...] *you* must have shared my disappointment, [...] at] so much valuable foodstuff running to waste. Every ounce of food is precious these days’ (MH 119). At this point, Emily enlists another flower fiend, the floral designer Miss Rose Fenton—also curiously single and disinterested in practical food production—to cajole Nichols into sharing his bounty. In the same letter, she lodges a similar request:

Miss Fenton, like myself, has a particular fondness for vegetables, and it is only the nature of her *work* that prevents her from growing them herself. [...] She once said to me—she is so whimsical!—that she could not possibly give her mind to her work if she were surrounded by acres of spinach! Yet, as it so happens, spinach is one of the vegetables that are essential to her constitution, which is not robust (lack of iron). (MH 120)

Both women, acutely aware of their need for vegetables and their belief Nichols is obligated to provide them, skirt any responsibility for procuring their own produce. They present Nichols’s own logic back to him: we must have beauty first. Their assertions, comically delivered, strike a chord because they signal a camaraderie and shared sensibility about how the world *ought* to operate. And, after all, they are only adhering to the very advice he peddles so patronisingly. In their estimation, Beauty provides a nourishment similar to that of the spinach Miss Rose finds so impossibly distracting. This, of course, is an exceptionally feminine viewpoint and one which the world often dismisses as effortlessly as Nichols refuses their request: ‘I must admit—though it goes against the grain to say so—that she [Miss Rose] had her attraction. (Not that she was going to be allowed a single leek, nor even a sprig of parsley)’ (MH 123). Though his decision strikes us as harsh, it reveals his practicing what he preaches: ‘One must be ruthless in the cause of Beauty’ (SL 66).

Throughout the trilogy, ruthlessness is the word that best describes Nichols’s good-natured rivalry with Emily and Rose. He considers them his equals and, as such, he forever strives to gain the upper hand over them—which he often manages—as in

the case of the forbidden fruit (and vegetables). They serve as foils in that each demonstrates different shades of femininity that are, at once, complementary and conflicting. Nichols evades any attempt they make to ensnare him into traditional masculinity, which most often comes to the fore when aesthetic matters demand consideration. At one point in *Sunlight on the Lawn*, Nichols becomes the arbitrator in a dispute between the two women, whose properties abut, about whether or not Emily must move her bonfire away from Rose's orchard. Rather than inhabit the prescribed role of the aristocrat who adjudicates such a dispute based upon tradition and beneficence, Nichols opts for the no-nonsense option of a coin toss instead. In doing so, he outs himself once more: 'I span the coin. Very clumsily, because I am not good at spinning coins [...] nor doing any of those things which are so admired in the truly male' (SL 204). In fact, whenever possible, Nichols announces to his readers that he is not traditionally masculine and that his approach to life bears this analysis out. A meeting with a rather nasty new neighbour who wishes to boast about his wife's sexual attractions incites this rather lengthy diatribe about brassieres:

When a manufacture of motor cars wishes to sell *me* his product, he does not tell me how fast it will go, nor how much petrol it uses, nor what is the cubic capacity of the engine...not that I should understand him if he did; he thinks it is enough to find a brassiere, stick something blond inside it, and then to arrange the brassiere and its occupant in an alluring position, with legs crossed, on the radiator. Well, it is not enough for *me*. When I buy a motor car...or a tube of toothpaste or a packet of cigarettes...I am unaffected by brassieres, or their occupants. I do not need them, and I wish they would get the hell out of it. (SL 89-90)

In publicly presenting himself as alternately impervious and indifferent to women's sex appeal, Nichols, especially in this case, makes the case for a conspicuous consumption that looks remarkably different from that depicted as mainstream masculinity. Unafraid and unashamed of his difference, he proudly proclaims other possibilities and different modes of survival. This, in itself, represents a queer victory at the time, as homosexuality—most frequently taken note of by its association with male femininity—would remain criminalised for another eleven years (1967) after the publication of the last book of the trilogy, *Sunlight on the Lawn*. Long before it was safe to do so, Nichols was lighting up not only the lawn, but also the closet.

Parting, or 'not only merry but more than slightly mad'

In the forward to this 1972 *The Gift of a Home*, a condensed version of the *Merry Hall* trilogy, Nichols notes, 'I now realize that the whole thing was not only merry but more than slightly mad. After I had paid the purchase price, I had barely enough to keep me, living modestly for about six months'.²⁵ While many would argue that having six months' supply of capital sounds super, it is important to take Nichols's point that he intentionally overextended himself when he committed to the life he envisioned at Merry Hall. His friend Arthur Diamond observed, 'It was sheer insanity and getting it straight nearly killed him'.²⁶ And yet, it did not. In fact, it is arguable that his greatest literary success stemmed from this particular bout of madness, as readers today continue to seek out the trilogy that chronicles his attempts to create an alternate world that reconfigured many of the assumptions about gender, sexuality, and relationships. In three light-hearted books that continue to be marketed as 'gardening literature', Nichols managed to present readers with a notably queer community in which virtually everyone is single or same-sex coupled—if one reads the texts closely enough to uncover them, that is—and no one seems even slightly unhappy about it. Everyone is obsessed with flowers, decoration, and the pursuit of beauty, and despite Nichols refusal to share his produce—both literally and figuratively—with women, he does eventually give way to more charitable, civic-minded behaviour in working to ensure that the deserving (often the elderly) are shielded from the ugliness of the world. He creates a magical environment engineered to welcome—even celebrate—difference, and to dismantle the pervasive heterosexist logics that Halberstam rails against about how communities should operate, the configuration of families, and to what use money should be put.

Best of all, though, Nichols sent his subversive, radical texts out into the world—often through book clubs especially geared toward women and/or gardeners—with charming illustrations and quaint tales that belie the fact that the narrator is outrageously queer and quite unlike the standard-issue Englishman. Nichols is never entirely clear, either, about the genre of the books. He presents himself autobiographically, though with embellishment; other characters he claims to be composites of various figures in his life. Some characters, though, were recognizable enough to get Nichols into trouble, so it is never completely clear where

²⁵ Connon, p. 228.

²⁶ Connon, p. 229.

the line between fiction and facts lies, which I suspect was an ongoing challenge for Nichols as he negotiated the disparities between his grand vision and the difficulties of a life lived in a world that is hostile to such difference, particularly when it comes to effeminate men. However, unlike most of his kind, Nichols figured out—in endless succession—how to market his flamboyant difference to great effect so that readers were left begging for more of his particular brand of beautiful badgering.

Works Cited

- Adair, Joshua G, 'Wilde Nostalgia: Queer Tradition in Beverley Nichols's Garden Trilogies', [sic]: *A Journal of Literature, Culture, and Literary Translation*, 2016 <<http://www.sic-journal.org/ArticleView.aspx?aid=417>> [accessed 3 August 2017]
- , "'One must be ruthless in the cause of Beauty': Beverley Nichols's and John Fowler's Queer Domesticity in 1950s England', *Visual Culture and Gender* 5 (2010), pp. 16–27
- and Rebekah Goemaat, 'The Art of Shrinking: Minority Stress, Coping, and Camp in Beverley Nichols's *Merry Hall* Trilogy', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* 18 (2016), pp. 501–523
- Brown, Erica, 'The Rise and Fall of the Original "Bright Young Thing": Beverley Nichols, *Crazy Pavements* (1927), and Popular Authorship', *The Review of English Studies* 66 (2015), pp. 144–163
- Connon, Bryan, *Beverley Nichols: A Life* (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 2000)
- Core, Phillip, 'Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Minneapolis, MN: University of Michigan Press, 1999)
- Halberstam, J. Jack, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011)
- Nichols, Beverley, *Are They the Same at Home?* (London: George H. Doran, 1927)
- , *Laughter on the Stairs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953)
- , *Merry Hall* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951)
- , *Sunlight on the Lawn* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956)