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point of view

Claude Summers Reflects on *Chris and Don*

February 1, 2009

**Portrait of a Marriage, Portrait of an Artist:
*Chris and Don: A Love Story***by [Claude J. Summers](#)

In Christopher Isherwood's 1976 sexual and political autobiography, *Christopher and His Kind, 1929-1939*, the novelist reassesses the decade in which he earned fame as one of the young writers of the 1930s. He begins by announcing that "To Christopher, Berlin meant Boys." He ends it, however, with the event in his life that proved even more decisive than his visit to Berlin: his 1939 emigration to the United States with his friend poet W. H. Auden.



Don Bachardy painting Christopher Isherwood in the early 1980s. Photograph by Jack Shear, courtesy Zeitgeist Films.

In the book's remarkable final paragraph, Isherwood looks back on the two young men as they are about to begin new lives in America and answers one final question: "Yes, my dears, each of you will find the person you came here to look for—the ideal companion to whom you can reveal yourself totally and yet be loved for what you are, not what you pretend to be."

For Auden, that ideal companion was Chester Kallman, whom he met within three months of his arrival in America and with whom he spent most of the rest of his life.

Isherwood, however, had to wait much longer to find his life's companion. As he remarks in *Christopher and His Kind*, "He is already living in the city where you will settle. He will be near you for many years without your meeting. But it would be no good if you did meet now. At present, he is only four years old." The reference is to Don Bachardy, whom Isherwood would not meet until 1952.

The meeting of the two, on the queer side of the beach in Santa Monica's Will Rogers State Park, proved momentous. It changed both their lives. They formed a union that would last until Isherwood's death in 1986.

Bachardy at the time was an impish, open-faced, gap-toothed young man with long legs and bright eyes. He was a star-struck Hollywood fan, who, with his older brother Ted, would crash premieres of movies in order to get their photographs taken with stars such as Joan Crawford, Marilyn Monroe, and Bette Davis.



Don Bachardy and Christopher Isherwood in the early 1950s. Photograph by Arthur Mitchell, courtesy Zeitgeist Films.

Only later, with Isherwood's encouragement and material support, would he become an internationally recognized artist perhaps best known for his portraits of movie stars.

At the time of their meeting, Isherwood was a middle-aged man in the process of remaking himself. He had become an American citizen, but had not yet become a distinctively American writer. A recent convert to Vedantism, he had translated Hindu holy books, while also working steadily as a scriptwriter for the Hollywood motion picture industry.

The first novel he wrote in the United States, *Prater Violet* (1945), was informed by his new religious perspective, but it was set in London. It featured a naïve narrator who bears the author's own name, and so, at least superficially, seemed a continuation of the Berlin stories in a different place and a lighter vein.

Only after the union with Bachardy did Isherwood become an American writer. Indeed, Bachardy may be said to have served as his American muse. His subsequent novels, beginning with *The World in the Evening* (1954), which contains a playful reference to Bachardy, would be American in their settings and unobtrusively religious in their themes. They would also be increasingly open and

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frank in their treatment of homosexuality.

Isherwood's masterpiece, *A Single Man* (1964), which tells the story of an expatriate Briton living in Los Angeles and mourning the loss of his lover of many years, was deeply influenced by the loneliness the novelist felt when Bachardy left home to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London.

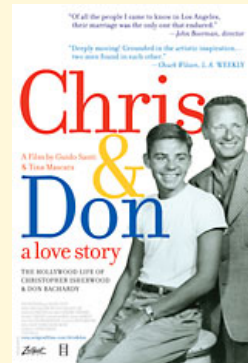
In the 1970s, Isherwood became the foremost literary spokesman for the gay liberation movement, and he and Bachardy, by then a well-known artist, became, in Armistead Maupin's phrase, the gay "first couple."

The two collaborated on a number of projects, including a dramatization of Isherwood's 1967 novel *A Meeting by the River* (produced in Los Angeles in 1972 and on Broadway in 1979) and a television script of *Frankenstein: The True Story* (broadcast on NBC in 1973). In 1980, the couple published *October*, which consists of diary entries kept by Isherwood in October 1979, accompanied by thirty-one portraits Bachardy made during the same period. In addition, the numerous drawings Bachardy made of Isherwood over a period of thirty years were themselves an intense collaboration.

But their greatest collaboration was their long love affair.

This love affair, which continues beyond the grave, is the subject of Guido Santi and Tina Mascara's luminous documentary, *Chris & Don: A Love Story*, which was released theatrically in the summer of 2008 and is now available as a DVD.

Expertly crafted from home movies (with glimpses of friends such as Tennessee Williams and E. M. Forster), still photographs, old and contemporary interviews (with the likes of Liza Minelli, Leslie Caron, Jack Larson, and, on the DVD, Gloria Stuart), and a few re-enactments, the documentary vividly brings to life one of the twentieth century's most significant artistic and literary marriages.



The documentary *Chris and Don: A Love Story* was released theatrically in 2008 and is now available on DVD.

Although the story of the love affair is told mainly from Bachardy's point of view, and features numerous interviews and voice-overs with the still youthful and handsome 74-year-old, Isherwood nevertheless dominates the documentary. He is present in the readings from his diary by Michael York, in the numerous film clips from their amazing home movies, in the interviews he gave over the years, and, most revealingly, in the portraits of him made by Bachardy throughout their relationship, including during the months Isherwood was dying.

Moreover, the main setting of the documentary is the beautiful house that the lovers shared for thirty years and in which Bachardy still lives. Located in Santa Monica, the house, stuffed full with art and books, perches over a canyon and offers a spectacular view of the ocean. Over twenty years after Isherwood's death, it seems still to breathe the togetherness of the rich life he shared with Bachardy.

The two first met when the writer was pursuing a casual relationship with Bachardy's older brother, Ted. Only later, when Bachardy was 18 and a freshman at UCLA, did Isherwood turn his attention to Don, who was feeling particularly fragile because his brother had recently been diagnosed with mental illness.

Tellingly, one of the re-enactments in the documentary is of a harrowing reaction to a hallucinogenic drug that Bachardy ingested on a visit to Paul Bowles in Tangier soon after he and Isherwood sealed their bond. Part of the terror Bachardy felt was directly related to the fear that he might be following Ted into the maelstrom of schizophrenia. In the event, Isherwood helped Bachardy through the horrifying experience, and the lovers were drawn even closer together in the knowledge that they could trust each other absolutely.

The thirty year difference in the partners' ages scandalized many of Isherwood's friends, including pioneering psychologist Evelyn Hooker, who requested that the couple move from the garden house Isherwood was renting from her.

As Isherwood confided to his diary and reproduced in his spiritual autobiography *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980), he did not feel guilty about the disparity in their ages, but he "did feel awed by the emotional intensity of our relationship, right from its beginning; the strange sense of a fated, mutual discovery. I knew that, this time, I had really committed myself. Don might leave me, but I couldn't possibly leave him, unless he ceased to need me. The sense of responsibility which was almost fatherly made me anxious but full of joy."

The age difference was exacerbated by the fact that Bachardy

looked young for his age. (Isherwood also looked very youthful for a man on the cusp of 50 but looking younger than one's age at 49 is quite different from looking young for one's age at 18.) When Auden saw a picture of Bachardy, he told friends that Isherwood had lost his mind and had taken up with a twelve-year-old!

On their honeymoon, the two lovers went to Monument Valley where director John Ford was shooting a western. Most of the crew assumed that Bachardy was Isherwood's son, as did many others in the early years of the relationship.

Isherwood's paternal feelings for the young Bachardy was a crucial aspect of their relationship, especially since Bachardy's own father offered him scant encouragement and noisily disapproved of his sons' homosexuality.

Although Isherwood was surprised by these feelings, in retrospect they were altogether predictable. His father died in World War I and in his earlier novels, he had repeatedly returned to the theme of the search for a father. In a way, he resolved the quandary of having lost his parent by becoming a kind of father to Bachardy, whose real father had abandoned him emotionally.

Isherwood's nurturance of Bachardy is one of the major themes of the documentary. Director John Boorman, one of the talking heads in the film, observing that the California-born Bachardy, a natural mimic, quickly adopted many of his lover's mannerisms, including his British accent, remarks that Isherwood had somehow managed to clone himself.

Leslie Caron, a long-time friend, similarly asserts that Isherwood molded Bachardy into the person he is now.

Bachardy himself acknowledges that it would be possible to construct a narrative in which a sophisticated older man shapes a beautiful young boy into a lover of his liking, but then laughingly dismisses the Trilby-Svengali scenario as absurd in his and Isherwood's case, chiefly because the beautiful young boy was far from a passive victim of the older man's wiles.

There was inevitably an imbalance of power in the relationship in the beginning. Isherwood was not only wealthy and worldly, but he was also a novelist of international stature and the scion of an old and distinguished English family. He was a member of Los Angeles's expatriate artistic community and socialized with Igor Stravinsky and Elsa Lanchester and Hollywood royalty, while Bachardy, in contrast, was the son of a dysfunctional working-class family, and someone who had only recently graduated from high school.

Although Bachardy was delighted to meet film stars such as Montgomery Clift and other celebrities soon after he and Isherwood became a couple, he also became acutely aware that he was usually regarded as merely a boy-toy and was seldom taken seriously by Isherwood's accomplished friends.

Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise: at 18 he was not fully formed and, notwithstanding his emotional maturity, was not even certain of what he wanted to be when he grew up.

Although Bachardy began sketching as a child and as a teen-ager was already drawing portraits, it was Isherwood who, during this crisis of confidence, encouraged him to develop his talent and to become an artist. He sent him to art school, first in Los Angeles and then in London, and he supported him in all sorts of ways, not least by providing him access to many of the celebrities who became his models.

Isherwood himself was Bachardy's first live model. Bachardy has described his portraits of his lover as representing both the full range of his work as an artist and his best effort.

Chris & Don is clearly a labor of love and also a work focused on the power of love. The film is a warm and affectionate celebration of the bond forged by two remarkable men. It documents the myriad ways in which their love for each other enriched their lives.

At the same time, however, the documentary does not shy away from the problems the lovers faced, both those caused by a disapproving world and those that arose from the inevitable changes that took place as Bachardy grew into maturity.

Even the cosmopolitan world in which Isherwood and Bachardy moved had its share of homophobes, especially in the repressive era in which they met. As a matter of principle the couple never denied their relationship or pretended to be straight, a stance that was not only extremely rare in the 1950s and 1960s, but also potentially dangerous.

Although the documentary does not dwell upon the challenges posed by homophobia, Bachardy does recount an incident at a party at the home of David Selznick and Jennifer Jones in which actor Joseph Cotten derisively referred to homosexuals as "half-men."

Well before the gay liberation movement and before Isherwood came

out publicly as a homosexual in the biography he wrote of his parents, *Kathleen and Frank* (1971), Bachardy and Isherwood were gay activists. Simply by living their lives openly and with integrity, they made a powerful political statement.

Bachardy's maturity brought with it its own challenges. As he gained confidence as an artist, he no longer needed Isherwood in the same way he did when he was younger, and he briefly considered leaving him.

Moreover, in the free-wheeling 1960s and 1970s, he felt the need for more sexual freedom, which led to a decision to open their relationship to others. They referred to the pursuit of sex outside the relationship as "mousing."

Without denying the difficulties and pain that these challenges entailed, the documentary credits the partners' mutual respect and abiding love with allowing the couple to work through the problems they faced and to create a marriage that was not simply an imitation of conventional heterosexual marriage.

One method the partners used to discuss their relationship obliquely was through notes and cartoon drawings in which Bachardy assumed the persona of a sensuous cat and Isherwood an old horse. The movie illustrates these dialogues through short animated sequences that charmingly convey the men's mutual need and commitment.

The end of the documentary focuses on Isherwood's last days, when Bachardy almost obsessively drew him. Isherwood's dying thus became "something we were doing together."

When displaying a portrait he made the day Isherwood died, Bachardy considers what his dead lover might think of his drawing his corpse. "He would say, yes, that's what an artist would do," Bachardy concludes, adding: "And that's what an artist *did* do."

Chris & Don is a surprisingly intimate account of a famous couple. Notwithstanding the number of celebrities who were their friends and who appear in the home movies (as in the clips of their visit to Tennessee Williams in Key West where *The Rose Tattoo*, featuring Anna Magnani and Burt Lancaster, was being filmed) and interviews, the focus throughout is on the personal relationship rather than on the couple's public personae.

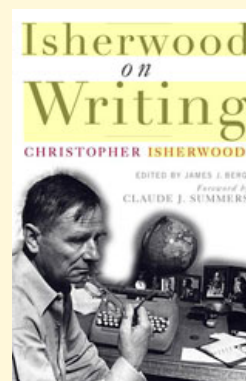
Santi and Mascara, who are themselves a couple, have remarked that "What interested us the most was their relationship, the obstacles they had to overcome, and how they managed to stay together for such a long time."

Chris & Don is a portrait of a marriage that resonates across orientations. Insofar as the film is also an account of Don Bachardy's coming-of-age, it is as well an affecting portrait of the artist both as a young man and in maturity.

Produced by Julia Scott, Tina Mascara, Guido Santi, and James White, *Chris & Don* is distributed by Zeitgeist Films. Among the "extras" in the DVD are a portfolio of 8 images of Isherwood as painted by Bachardy, additional clips from home movies, interviews with Gloria Stuart and others that were deleted from the film, and a discussion by Bachardy of the artwork he and Isherwood collected.

Don Bachardy's work is also the subject of a short film, *The Eyes of Don Bachardy* (2005), by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Terry Sanders.

The University of Minnesota Press, which has reissued many of Isherwood's books, has recently published *Isherwood on Writing*, edited by James Berg, a collection of lectures that the novelist delivered at California universities in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The lectures offer a valuable glimpse into the writer's literary strategies and theories at a pivotal moment in his life, a time when he was redirecting his career.



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About Claude J. Summers

Claude J. Summers is the General Editor of [glbtq.com](#) and the author of *Christopher Isherwood* (1980, Ungar), a book-length study of the author and his work.

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