



Crisp, Quentin (1908-1999)

by Claude J. Summers

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Actor, writer, performance artist, and wit Quentin Crisp described himself as "one of the stately homos of England" and "not merely a self-confessed homosexual, but a self-evident one." He became a celebrity in England as a result of his extraordinary autobiography, *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968), and a celebrity in the United States when its dramatization as a television movie starring John Hurt was broadcast in New York in 1976.

Crisp was born Denis Charles Pratt on December 25, 1908, the youngest of four children of a solicitor and a nursery governess. He was educated at a minor public school in Staffordshire and then took art courses at Battersea Polytechnic and High Whitcomb.

As a young man in London he supported himself in a variety of ways, including designing book covers, freelancing as a commercial artist, and occasionally working as a prostitute and a tap-dancing teacher. During World War II, exempt from military service because of his open homosexuality, he was employed by a government-funded art school as a nude model. Hence, he became a "naked civil servant," as he entitled his autobiography.

Because his homosexuality was so self-evident, as epitomized by his effeminacy, hennaed hair, long fingernails, and make-up, Crisp not only became a London "character" in the 1930s and 1940s, but frequently aroused the anger of total strangers, who sometimes attacked him physically, beating and spitting upon him, simply for being who he was.

In this sense, his crusade of making visible the existence of effeminate homosexual men certainly succeeded, though at a high cost in self-esteem and safety.

Published only one year after the Sexual Offenses Act partially decriminalized male homosexual acts in private in Great Britain, Crisp's 1968 autobiography, *The Naked Civil Servant*, made him famous (or, as he would say, notorious) in England.

Perhaps the first modern, unapologetic, non-euphemistic, uncoded account of the life of a living homosexual, *The Naked Civil Servant* presented Crisp's flamboyant (but self-denigrating) personality, and his arch--sometimes sardonic--observations about English society and conventions, straightforwardly yet wittily and unsentimentally.

Its success was greatly multiplied when it was made into a television movie in 1975, featuring a dazzling performance by John Hurt in the title role.

The Naked Civil Servant vividly documents the indignities and absurdities to which a certain kind of homosexual was subject in pre-gay liberation Britain. It also, however, partakes of many of the same homophobic attitudes that contributed to the persecution of homosexuals.

Although he thought that by wearing cosmetics he "managed to shift homosexuality from being a burden to being a cause," Crisp clearly also himself thought of homosexuality as unnatural, and he internalized many of the most damaging stereotypes about homosexuals, including the notion that homosexuals are mentally ill and inevitably frustrated in their search for love.

While Crisp can hardly be seen as particularly enlightened about homosexuality, he deserves enormous credit for his courage. His refusal to be cowed into the closet and his insistence on his right to live as he chose were significant acts of defiance for which he paid a heavy price.

In the autumn of 1977, Crisp traveled to New York for the first time. Long an admirer of Americans, whom he found to be more generous of spirit and open than his fellow Britons, he determined to live in the city, where the broadcast of *The Naked Civil Servant* the previous year had made him well-known in gay circles.

In 1980, at the age of 72, he emigrated to the United States, with the intention of beginning his life anew. He moved into a room on East 3rd Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side and obtained "Resident Alien" status. He always felt grateful to America for the kindness and tolerance that he found there.

In Crisp's American years, he became a fixture on the New York gay scene, as a writer, performance artist, and wit. Even before moving to New York, he had created a one-man show in which he talked about style with only a bentwood chair and a hatstand as props.

For the rest of his life, he would periodically revive (and update) this show. Full of bons mots and witty observations about style (or its absence), the show proved very popular and Crisp often toured with it around the country.

In the 1980s, Crisp also became a film critic and columnist. He wrote film criticism for *Christopher Street* and a column for the *New York Native*. He was to collect many of the columns written for the *Native* in *Resident Alien: The New York Diaries* (1997), a work in which he manages to be both charming and iconoclastic.

Other books from his later years include *How to Have a Life-Style* (1975), *How to Become a Virgin* (1981), and *Manners from Heaven* (1985).

As a writer, and as a persona, Crisp managed to be at once witty and generous. His books are funny, but they are also often penetrating. He himself was unfailingly gracious, but often also relentless in exposing the absurdities and injustices of English and American social mores.

If *The Naked Civil Servant* chronicles the mistreatment and pain (both borne with a stiff upper lip) of his youth in England, his later books stress the contentment he found in America, where life is presented as a comedy of manners.

Crisp also gained fame in his old age as an actor. He appeared as himself in a number of documentary films, including *Resident Alien* (1991), *Naked in New York* (1994), and *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), and in small parts in commercial films, such as *Philadelphia* (1993) and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995).

Perhaps his most interesting performance was as Queen Elizabeth I in *Orlando* (1993), Sally Potter's film based on Virginia Woolf's novel. He also starred opposite Lea DeLaria in Sara Moore's farcical *Homo Heights* (1997).

Crisp's life not only inspired several documentary films, but it was also the subject of a skillfully constructed play. Crisp gave playwright Tim Fountain permission to turn his diaries into a dramatic monologue entitled *Resident Alien*. Performed with style and subtlety by transvestite actor Bette Bourne, a

veteran of drag shows, the play enjoyed successful runs on both sides of the Atlantic in 1999 and 2000.

Crisp died in Manchester, England on November 21, 1999, at the age of 90. He suffered a heart attack while on tour with his one-man show, *An Audience with Quentin Crisp*.

Although he lived in notoriously squalid conditions (his theory being that housework was entirely useless: "After the first four years the dirt doesn't get any worse," he quipped), Crisp left an estate valued in excess of \$600,000. But his greatest legacy was his example of courage.

Despite the contradictions of his life, particularly the facts that he refused to campaign for homosexual equality and failed to grasp the seriousness of the AIDS epidemic, by the end of his life he had become a beloved figure in glbtq culture.

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Claude J. Summers is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of www.glbtq.com. In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.