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#### Article

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# Capturing Homosocial Worlds in the Photographs of the Rugby Club, 1885–1920

Lucinda Matthews-Jones 

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## ABSTRACT

During the First World War, the Rev. Charles S. Donald, warden of the London-based Rugby Club, sent several war time circulars to current and former club members. This article examines how Donald used the circular's photographs to sustain pre-war links. It will therefore consider how snapshots from their annual camping trips and boxing heroes inscribed male intimacy and friendship. Touch will be shown to be a vehicle through which homosocial intimacy was expressed both in the moment the photograph was captured and during the war.

Behind the counter of Rugby School's historic Temple Reading Room is a blue-bound book containing wartime circulars sent by the Rev. Charles Stuart Donald to current and former members of Notting Hill's Rugby Club who were fighting in the First World War.<sup>1</sup> How these wartime circulars ended up in Rugby School, 80 miles away from Notting Hill, is unclear but perhaps not surprising. The School had financially and personally supported the Rugby Club as part of its School Mission programme, and throughout its existence the Club drew on the support of the school. It was founded by Authur F. Walrond, a former Rugby School student, in 1884, initially as a boys' club. A men's club was established five years later on Walmer Road in London's Notting Dale.

Like many other institutions of its kind, the Rugby Club was part of a wider movement that saw socially concerned middle-class Victorians and Edwardians undertake club work in Britain's poor urban areas.<sup>2</sup> It sought to provide an alternative, self-improving space for socialising away from the street and pub for working-class boys, and later men. It was hoped that the Club would also enable different socioeconomic groups to get to know one another. In 1895 residential accommodation in Notting Hill was offered to club workers (who were often former Rugby School pupils), in the form of the settlement house, called Rugby House. In the Club, local boys attended compulsory drill classes alongside other physical activities such as boxing and gymnastics, in addition to cultural and educational classes such as singing, writing, drawing and bamboo-work. Members of the men's club played billiards, card games and dominoes, or read magazines, periodicals and books from the Club's library.<sup>3</sup> From 1891, links between the Rugby Club and its members were further strengthened by a week's

summer camp in New Romney, Kent. The men's camp was held in the first week of August, with a boys' camp following a week later.<sup>4</sup>

During the war, the Club sought, through Donald, the warden, to maintain their connection to the 720 former and current Rugby Club members who had left Notting Hill behind to fight for their country during the First World War.<sup>5</sup> For the first time ever, war had led to the mass mobilisation of men, all of whom left behind various biological and non-biological kinship networks. Historians have long recognised that soldiers were emotionally supported during the Great War by regular correspondence between themselves and their communities.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, scholars have often turned to letters to understand how relationships formed through institutions were maintained.<sup>7</sup> This article looks at one homosocial institution to consider how pre-war photographs were utilised to connect with men away from the Rugby Club. The Club circulars consisted of letters from Donald and other upper middle-class Club workers or military men, tables of regimental information on those fighting in the war, and short reports on the Club. A substantial part of each one was dedicated to photographs of Club life before the war: by 1918, eighty-four images had been sent out, with seventeen photographs being the issue average. The photographs Donald selected stood apart from the text by being printed on brighter, white gloss paper. They not only extended the reach of the Club but also visually pulled working-class Club members back to it. At the same time, Donald's decision to sustain wartime links with the Club's members in this way, despite paper restrictions, reveals how critical it was for him too.

In this article, the circulars will be read as a homosocial album. At its most basic level, homosociality is a term used to define the regular association of a single sex, usually men. Male homosocial relationships are often maintained by excluding both women and those men who do not fit within a specific masculine identity. They are typically experienced within single-sex activities or spaces.<sup>8</sup> Upper middle-class and working-class men in the nineteenth century often had distinct male associational practices that emerged from school, work and leisure spaces, like the club, pub or sport.<sup>9</sup> The Rugby Club, however, was a cross-class homosocial space that aimed to bring together upper middle-class club workers and working-class club members, in an all-male space that include the clubroom, the boxing ring and camp. The article asks two questions: What happens when homosocial worlds are displaced? And how are male associational relationships maintained when men can no longer share a physical space? The photographs from the circulars invite us to consider the intersectional, collective parameters of how male bonding was reinscribed through the circular; and they show how photographs become a tool of homosocial desire to stay connected through a visual all-male world.

In assessing the photographs sent by Donald, I am responding to Elizabeth Edwards' recent invitation to historians to let photographs lead our historical enquiry of the past. This is not because photographs offer us an unfiltered window through which we can 'see' the past but rather because, according to Edwards, they create 'historiographical disturbances', which 'enable us to think about [our] historical questions differently'.<sup>10</sup> Two such 'historiographical disturbances' arise from the current investigation. First, the photographs trace male friendships within a cross-class homosocial space, providing a visual means to investigate how men embodied friendship for the camera. Second, they demonstrate how Donald's curation of these wartime circulars

emotionally supported him, as well as the men away from the Club, through an intimate presentation of their homosocial world.

To explore these disturbances, I will examine how Donald framed touch in the Rugby Club circular to visually inscribe male intimacy and friendship. Touch cemented the Club's social bonds and will be explored here in three ways. First, the physical act of touch was captured through embodied arrangements such as the placement of hands and bodies. Second, Donald's curation of the circular enabled him and his recipients to feel touched. Third, the circular, as a tangible object, enabled Donald and the recipients to physically touch the photographs. Touch thus becomes a vehicle through which homosocial intimacy was expressed both in the moment the photograph was captured and then during the war.

Photographs offer a mode in which to examine the inscriptions of cross-class homosocial networks because they visualise 'the bodily gestures, movements, and enactments' of the gendered self.<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler argues that gender acts are performative and 'constructed through specific corporeal acts'.<sup>12</sup> Male friendship at the Rugby Club should therefore be understood to be visually inscribed by the act of touch and then reinscribed by Donald's invitation to view touch. This complicates the alignment of male-on-male patriarchy with control and heteronormative male presentations with bodily and emotional restriction, and the overused assertion that elite, white men of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods were rational, rather than emotional, beings.<sup>13</sup> Scholars like Constance Classen have claimed that touch is a feminine act and that the Victorian period culminated in a 'hands-off masculinity' because of growing fears around effeminacy.<sup>14</sup> Building on the pivotal work of Eve Sedgwick, John Potvin similarly suggested that the late nineteenth century marked a shift as men physically and emotionally distanced themselves from one another as 'self-control, restraint and distance become the hallmarks of ideal masculine identity'.<sup>15</sup> Much of this reasoning comes from the belief that men were unable to display emotional intimacy publicly.<sup>16</sup> This has meant, according to the sociologist Danny Kaplan, that scholars have often argued that men bond without intimacy. However, he contends that hegemonic homosocial spaces develop distinct, but often ambivalent, tools for intimate sociability, which give men 'more room to manoeuvre their feelings'.<sup>17</sup>

A contrasting, and rich, body of scholarship has increasingly used visual and material sources to demonstrate what they tell us about male emotions, feelings and relationships in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>18</sup> Central to this have been studies on how professional portraits and domestic snapshots captured friendships between men.<sup>19</sup> Many of the Rugby Club circulars' photographs were amateur snapshots but some, especially the boxing and the team sporting images, were professional portraits. Rugby Club friendship was about collective male-on-male connection. This article provides a unique opportunity to explore pre-war and wartime traces of male friendships in a homosocial space that was able to accommodate more than one class experience. Nonetheless, Rugby Club friendships needs to be understood within the power dynamics of the day. While they had the potential to be close as well as 'deep, enduring and binding attachments', and the Club workers wanted genuine connections between themselves and working-class members, this was still a hierarchical homosocial group.<sup>20</sup> As Seth Koven reminds us, even the most intimate cross-class relationships of this period were 'unequal' and 'asymmetrical'.<sup>21</sup>

The Rugby Club circulars demonstrate that men welcomed visual presentation of male worlds lost to them, and that intimate male friendship was not restricted to the trenches, but also arose from soldiers' homosocial worlds at home.<sup>22</sup> In this article, I 'embrace exceptionality' to understand how one man, Donald, sought to provide comfort and connectivity for himself and for men away in the armed forces. Donald demonstrates the emotional possibilities that some upper-class men were able to experience as paternal figures.<sup>23</sup> In the next section, I consider what the homosocial album tells us about Donald's subjective and emotional intentions, and how he sought to mobilise emotional communities, drawing on the fact that photography is an 'emotional practice' that has 'shaped, embodied and communicated emotions'.<sup>24</sup> I then investigate how Donald's selections shaped his recording of pre-war club life. The final section will focus on the male photographic subject caught within the photographs, and will consider how the circular enacted touch, intimacy and closeness/distance to show how these emotional and homosocial worlds were multiple and layered within the Rugby Club.

### The homosocial album

Donald's wartime circular needs to be understood as part of a late Victorian and Edwardian 'visual economy' that saw the growth in photography and its dissemination. As devised by Deborah Poole, the concept of the 'visual economy' is organised around three stages of a photograph's journey: its creation, technologies that enable the mass production of images, and circulation of those images.<sup>25</sup> During the period under discussion, technical innovations had helped to make cameras easier for amateur photographers to use. They were more efficient, lighter and relatively inexpensive. This, in turn, helped spread camera ownership and offered more opportunities for people to have their likeness taken.<sup>26</sup> Within the context of cross-class institutions, the growth of domestic photography had encouraged workers to document the everyday goings-on in clubs and their local areas.<sup>27</sup> Camping was often the 'privileged subject' of their collections.<sup>28</sup> In the Edwardian period, holiday and leisure activities were the most popular events caught on camera.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, changes in publishing techniques helped to make it easier to reproduce these photographs.<sup>30</sup> Camping and outdoor activities often appeared in materials such as magazines, periodicals and annual reports because it allowed organisations to present themselves visually to a wider audience.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, Donald's circular disrupts these practices. The snapshots were not reproduced for an external club audience, interested in reading working-class men's labouring bodies or the socioeconomic conditions of urban living. Nor did the images accompany articles on the Rugby Club in the School's magazine. Instead, Donald reserved these photographs for an immediate and more intimately connected audience that was both local and removed from the Club by war. Their value lay in their ability to strengthen the Rugby Club's homosocial world and create intimacy among those away and those left behind. Consequently, their value was not exclusively tied to the moments they captured, but also to 'the social processes of accumulation, possession, circulation, and exchange'.<sup>32</sup> Through the circulars' photographs, Donald curated and managed an emotional community, simultaneously visually narrating his composure/discomposure regarding the war and drawing local men back to the Club.

Photographers are largely invisible actors. They are not physically caught in the frame, being observed only by those whose likeness is being taken. Yet their presence animates. It is through their eyes that we see male relationships being performed and unfolding through specific homosocial activities. Little is known about the production of the images used in Donald's circulars. The photographs are unattributed but it is almost certain that they would have been taken by middle-class camp workers. Annual reports mention two camp photographers, both club workers: Julian Lousada in 1904 and Arthur L. Russell in 1911.<sup>33</sup> It is also likely that many of the images were taken by Donald and that he was drawing on his personal archive to put together the circular. A handful of images that appear to be taken from an earlier period could have been provided by other camp workers or already have found their way into the Rugby Club's archive by the time Donald collated the circulars. If we assume that Donald took many of the photographs, then the power of his camp camera lay in its ability to inscribe peer-to-peer homosociality through an upper middle-class lens. His impulse to push the camera's button was about visualising male bonding and acts of friendship.

Even if we do not know who took the photographs, we know that Donald was, to borrow from Lucie Ryzova, the 'author-subject' of this wartime circular.<sup>34</sup> His first circular, sent in early 1915, simply contained an exterior shot of the Rugby Club building on Walworth Street.<sup>35</sup> In October 1915, he wrote to Club members in his editorial that 'I hope you'll like the Old Camp snap-shots'.<sup>36</sup> This was the first circular to contain extensive photographs. It was not the last. What is notable is that there do not appear to have been any photographs of Donald himself. Yet his presence animates through the selection and presentation of the photographs. This role enabled him to become the curator and custodian of the Rugby Club's homosocial world. It also allowed him to retain a connection with men from whom he was separated by the war, being exempt from fighting because of his age and his status as the clergyman-warden of the Club.

The photographs in the circulars offer a personal, intimate framing of male friendships through Donald's eyes. As a bachelor, his pre-war masculinity rested on his connectivity with a homosocial world. As John Tosh has articulated, homosocially centred friendship to provide middle-class men of this era with an opportunity to emotionally connect and respond to other men, through an 'alternative emotional resource'.<sup>37</sup> The war, however, removed Donald's social standing because he was left to look after girls and boys. The circular was his means to reforge the connection with men away from the Club. His selection of photographs articulated male friendship, belonging and connectivity, thus becoming a personal vehicle for him to work through his various emotional states as he responded to the longevity of war and the separation he experienced from those he presented as his friends.

Photographs have various lives. In the first instance, Donald selected images that framed friendship when the camera shutter closed. In the second instance, he took the time to select for publication images of both camp life and the Rugby Club boxing world. In doing so, he circulated his own personal 'fantasies, ideas, and sentiments' of friendship to a working-class audience.<sup>38</sup> Hence he repurposed photographs taken in one setting to make and maintain friendship links with those in another: the armed forces. By curating the photographs chosen for the circulars, he created a homosocial narrative that centred on friendship, touch and intimacy, using images that appear not to have been publicly disseminated before the war.<sup>39</sup> Yet, Donald's key role in the



circulars' construction means that middle-class articulation of club life continued to be privileged, the idealised homosocial community being drawn from his own perspective.

While the circular was not straightforwardly an album or a scrapbook, ideas about the construction of family albums can be extended to Donald and his publication. The creation of a family album has long been understood to be a feminine activity that privileges the domestic sphere and the intimate articulations of the family.<sup>40</sup> Yet Donald's circulars support Gillian Rose's claim that 'the production, circulation and consumption of photographs produce and reproduce the imagined geographies of the social group or institution for which they are made'.<sup>41</sup> The practice of putting together an album can, according to Rose, be understood as a 'social process', which is important to the 'maintenance of family togetherness' and 'friendships'.<sup>42</sup> Photograph albums were 'highly personal objects which were created and used in order to picture and perform complex emotional relationships'.<sup>43</sup> The war threatened to disrupt a community-based homosocial identity that was made through regular face-to-face contact. In response, the photographs and the circular provided an extended sense of homosocial belonging, enabling individuals to enact the concepts of 'identity, belonging and community' when people were removed from one another.<sup>44</sup>

The photographs became a way for Donald to reassert the Rugby Club's commitment to a missing male world. This is not to suggest that his visual inscriptions of the club were straightforwardly read the way he intended. It was highly likely that, for some Club members, the pictures reaffirmed their sense of belonging to the Club they were removed from. For others, however, the circulars might have conveyed a male relationship that they were not part of, especially if they did not attend the over-represented New Romney summer camps. The potential for further alienation was strengthened when knowing became important to viewing.<sup>45</sup> Names do not appear to correspond to the order of people caught on camera in the captions underneath. Nevertheless, even if recipients did not know the people in the images, the photographs were a powerful emotional reminder that Donald's pre-war male associations had not been forgotten and they convey an element of how Donald saw the men and his wartime commitment to communicating their homosocial relationships through photographs. The homosocial album helped Donald connect himself with local working-class men and the photographs were the emotional currency he used to maintain this friendship.

The recipient was further invited to engage with these images because they were printed on higher-quality paper than the rest of the circular. Donald thereby encouraged the soldiers to look closely at their male friends: according to Chris Brickell, photographs in an album welcomed the viewer into an 'intimate interaction'.<sup>46</sup> This might have concided with the physical act of touch. Lynda Nead has noted 'haptic visuality collapses the distance between viewer and the image'.<sup>47</sup> The glossy surface of this part of the circular invited soldiers to touch the images, running their fingertips over the faces and bodies of familiar people. They may have even removed them from the accompanying text to become much needed 'tokens of friendship and admiration' of a homosocial world beyond the frontier of war.<sup>48</sup> The recipient's gaze was also pulled back to a different, and potentially more intimate, homosocial world. War had disrupted the Rugby Club's affective ties; the album gave men in the armed forces 'a sense of "being held" in communal beingness'.<sup>49</sup> It reminded them that they were

more than soldiers and reconnected them to a world from which they were removed.<sup>50</sup> Finally, the photographs focused on fun, which, according to Michael Leyshon and Tea Rverin, ‘has the capacity to become memorised, embodied’.<sup>51</sup> The camping snapshots invited recipients to remember and return to somewhere thought of as a happy place, creating embodied memories centred on laughter, smiling and happiness.

The centrality of homosociality to Donald’s visual remembering of the Rugby Club partially reflects his lived experience as head of an all-male settlement, but also the way the Club itself placed an organising emphasis on the production of public male identities for working-class men based on health, education, civility and cross-class understanding. It was not lost on Donald that these values were what was needed to fight the war. He returned to the photographs to remind soldiers of experiences that had the potential to offset the horrors they faced. This also helped him to cement his own self-identity as a warden to men away from the club. His letters and his commitment to sending photographs confirm Michael Roper’s idea that nostalgia was used as a communication tool for people having to maintain relationships with one another from a distance, with soldiers conveying their longing for the recovery of a ‘shared past’ and future.<sup>52</sup> What makes the circular unique is the positioning of Donald, a home-based club warden, as the architect of this nostalgic framing. This was continually reinforced in the texts of the circulars. Club members were not forgotten. Club workers wanted them back at home and attending their summer camp. Donald strengthened this by repeatedly ‘mentioning your names’.<sup>53</sup> When sounding out names became impossible, he sent captioned photographs instead. For him, utterances, both aural and visual, enacted the homosocial worlds no longer physically inhabiting the Rugby Club.

In 1917, Donald wrote hopefully that the war must surely be ending.<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere, he started to count the number of circulars he had sent, from his third circular in the same year.<sup>55</sup> Counting transformed his initial gung-ho attitude to one that emphasised absence. This also coincided with the inclusion of more New Romney Camp snapshots because they ‘remind some of you of happy days gone by but also of happy days to come’.<sup>56</sup> His second circular that year included a letter asserting that he had hoped he would not be sending another. He continually evoked the image of the Club and how it awaited its members’ return.<sup>57</sup> The same year, Donald asked club members to send him their addresses and news, proclaiming ‘I like photographs, too, if any are going’.<sup>58</sup> Some working-class members did send Donald portrait photographs and in doing so they visually spoke to him and the men they were removed from. As Figure 1 shows, these images were included in the Rugby circular next to the title page. The placement of uniformed photographs visually reinforced the scattering of the Rugby Club. Men were no longer captured in the same photographic frame but individualised, while the uniforms connected them to another homosocial network, the armed forces. Donald recreated the Club’s homosocial network by visually reuniting them on the same page.

Donald’s wish for peace and normalcy was therefore reasserted through his presentation of the club’s homosocial world. Images and words have a complex relationship, but captions can heighten our understanding of how sources were intended to be read. From the May 1916 circular onwards, he used captions to speak directly to Notting Dale men. He directed his readers to ‘look forward to the day when some of you will meet on the yellow sands once more’, while captions offered readers the chance to reminisce on earlier camps: ‘where the worst enemy is the “Earwig” and “stewed





**Figure 1:** From 'The Rugby Club: Notting Hill', 1918 (Sixth circular), Rugby School Archive. Reproduced by kind permission of Rugby School Archives & Special Collections. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

plums and kippers'''. Donald's hope was shared by the club worker Claude P. Evers, who declared in the same circular, 'And I am looking forward to some more jolly camps at No. 27 Station, New Romney'.<sup>59</sup> When the war was finally over in 1918, pictures were captioned in capital letters: 'THE NEXT CAMP FOR SOME OF YOU' and 'YOUR NEXT CAMP'. The images that followed no longer included names or people, but invitations to the men to think of themselves at camp, such as 'Here will

we make a Romney stew once more' and 'Come and Join ...'. The now empty images invited the men to see themselves once again at the New Romney camp.<sup>60</sup>

### Donald and the making of the Rugby Club's intimate homosocial worlds

Donald selected photographs for the wartime circulars not simply because they documented past activities of the Rugby Club but because they were intended to visually communicate, and spur remembering of, the homosocial cultures produced at the club, creating a visual dialogue of male belonging to a male working-class spectator. The central subjects were camping and boxing, the Rugby Club's two main homosocial worlds.

New Romney on the Kent coast, the regular campsite for the Club, temporarily moved men from their homes and into specific all-male spaces, providing opportunities for homosocial experiences and activities. Of the eighty-four pictures included in the circular, sixty-one related to the yearly camp. On a practical level New Romney provided the space and light to take pictures. The camp photographs successfully caught the Club's homosocial moments by including a range of sporting activities, from running competitions to boxing, swimming and games, together with photographs of male peer networks and camp domesticity.

The camps were part of the yearly calendar from 1891. As the *Annual Report* for 1908 noted, the camp 'was a week of good fellowships, sport and ease'; one camp reporter in 1902 claimed that it was 'the best place in the world'.<sup>61</sup> It is likely that the excitement of camp would have infiltrated the Rugby Club for weeks, if not months, before August, as indicated by the fact that a hundred Notting Dale men attended each one. Rugby men were central to the successful running of the camp: current club workers were supported by many former club workers and Rugby School alumni, who believed that a week or two away from their everyday lives would help them retain their connection to both the Club and the School. Relationships were further strengthened by the decision that each camp worker should be responsible for a selection of tents during the boys' camp. The outcome was 'to get into much closer touch with the boys than would otherwise be possible'.<sup>62</sup>

The camp thus responded to growing concerns that the middle and working classes were socially disconnected from one another. It offered campers the chance to get to know each other across class boundaries, away from their homes and other kinship networks, creating a sense of togetherness and identity in a concentrated homosocial setting.<sup>63</sup> Relationships could be developed in a different, perhaps more neutral, setting than the urban terrain of Notting Hill. Men were encouraged to create collective, shared experiences in a primarily male space. Tosh argued that late Victorian and Edwardian men took advantage of new opportunities to escape home, which was an increasingly feminine sphere. Public-school men like Donald would have 'tilted in the direction of homosociality at the expense of domestic graces or home tastes', preferring instead to centralise male comradeship and group loyalty.<sup>64</sup> While few men rejected the straitjacket of female-led domesticity (as Donald did as warden of the all-male Rugby House), they would have been all too aware of the imperial narratives of manly self-reliance, adventure and homosociality.<sup>65</sup> Annual camping trips provided them with a brief space to live this masculine identity, confirming Tosh's idea that men took temporary flights from domesticity.<sup>66</sup>

Donald's projection of the Club's homosocial world saw the total removal of women and girls. His exclusion of women is noteworthy, as the boys' club was supported in its work by middle-class women.<sup>67</sup> In 1894, the Club annual report was able to boast that Miss Walrond, the sister of the club's founder, and Miss Middleton had 'the effect of civilising and softening the boys'.<sup>68</sup> Even though the Club added a girls' club in 1907, sociality was in keeping with the period and dedicated to the production of separate gendered identities and behaviours. Women were only marginal, accidental figures in exterior shots of the club itself rather than at the camps.<sup>69</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that female club workers were involved in the construction of the circular or in deciding what images to choose. Instead, they were rendered invisible, included neither in letters nor in pictures. Donald's circular also removed the female interactions that campers would have had with women at New Romney as local inhabitants and shopkeepers. Even the highly prized tea provided by Mrs Hardy, the vicar's wife, does not appear, despite the annual reports' repeated praise for the doughnuts and Chelsea buns.<sup>70</sup>

While women are absent from the photographs, Donald did include two snapshots showing working-class men in female theatrical roles. We do not know how the Club or its members responded to male homosexuality or effeminate men, but these images suggest that its homosocial worlds were able to accommodate transgressive gender performances. In one image, three men stand around the camp's iron kettle draped in camp blankets, as the witches from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.<sup>71</sup> In the second, Shakespeare was evoked again, when Chris Allum, dressed as Bottom from a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, lent out of a window as Juliet to perform the famous balcony scene. Staring into the camera smiling, he reaches out to his Romeo, played by P. King. They hold hands with one another, but their gaze and laughing faces are turned to the camera.<sup>72</sup> Both these cross-dressing episodes had the potential to conflict with the heteronormative parameters of the Rugby Club and open the male performers to homophobic reactions. Yet female impersonation was not unusual in this period and had been part of army entertainment culture since the eighteenth century.<sup>73</sup>

These cross-gender theatrical performances are not explicitly feminine performances or attempts by the actors to permanently transgress their male identities.<sup>74</sup> *Macbeth*'s witches wear dark camping blankets and Allum is not dressed in women's clothing but rather in a camp-made animal costume. He is not only gesturing to female impersonation but relying on the cultural knowledge of the viewer. Given that Rugby Club men were reported to be enthusiastic learners of Shakespeare's plays, it can be assumed that many soldiers would have been familiar with the balcony scene.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, Allum's overtly masculine identity and his standing in the Club allowed him to adopt this persona without affecting others' views of him. He was a highly regarded member of the Club, having been a professional boxer; he later fought on behalf of the Rugby Club, winning the Club's Old Guards' Challenge Cup in 1896. After briefly leaving Notting Hill to fight in the Boer War, he became the club's boxing instructor.<sup>76</sup>

Other possible feminine inscriptions appear in the circular through images of camp domesticity and male grooming. Camping implied a removal of men from home and community, but it was not a straightforward rejection of comfort or specific domestic rituals. Here, the images extend the ideas of Amy Milne-Smith and Quintin Colville



**Figure 2:** From 'The Rugby Club: Notting Hill', 1916 (third circular), Rugby School Archive. Reproduced by kind permission of Rugby School Archives & Special Collections. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

that all-male spaces were infused with domestic practices and feeling.<sup>77</sup> Men were shown cooking and washing up.<sup>78</sup> Eating and drinking became a tool for framing the Rugby Club's collective practices of homosocial socialisation, regularly captured by pictures of large groups dining.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, several snapshots showed working-class campers attending to their personal appearance and hygiene. Far from suggesting that this was a rugged hyper-adventurous environment (a framing commonly found in contemporary periodicals and novels), these images show a continued preoccupation with and pride in bodily maintenance and appearance that middle-class men wanted to capture, and working-class men wanted to enact.<sup>80</sup> Camp grooming was experienced as a collective homosocial activity where men commented, observed and supported one another, showing that the desire to look good was not simply for women but also for other men. By showing central grooming was for working-class club members' performance of manliness, these snapshots disrupt the late Victorian and Edwardian cultural fascination with photographs capturing dirty working-class bodies.<sup>81</sup> The images in Figure 2 present individual and collective male grooming practices. The image on the left is evidently staged: four men pose with their grooming instruments, playing out their personal grooming rituals for the camera. In the second image, two men wash a fellow camper's hair. This task was not merely about sanitation but was a ritual bonding men together through the performed act of washing and observing. The laughing face of the man who stares directly at the photographer gestures to his comfort in the enactment, being, as Begiato asserts, 'a metonym for a man untroubled by and comfortable with his gender identity'.<sup>82</sup>

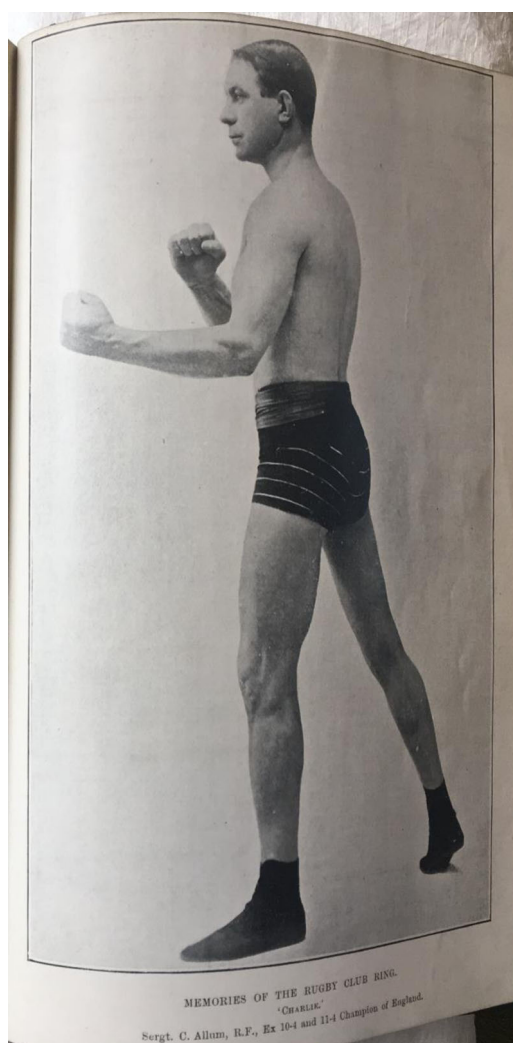
As Donald's unease about the war grew, he turned to a second form of photographic content: images of boxing heroes from the local area. This choice is profoundly revealing of the cross-class homosociality his photo albums were intended to communicate, and to which he was committed. The 1917 circular contained ten photographs of Rugby Club boxers. Two were of local boxers in military uniform,

thus connecting their pre-war boxing prowess to their current war service.<sup>83</sup> Other images were of keen Club boxers sparring at the New Romney camps.<sup>84</sup> Combined with these camp shots were professional boxing photographs which emphasised the subjects' physiques.<sup>85</sup> Naked torsos and arms folded or raised with hands clenched drew attention to these boys' and men's muscled upper arms and toned legs. Their svelte bodies came not from undernourishment but from physical training and discipline.<sup>86</sup> As Gorn has argued, a boxer's physique was 'a palpable expression of such masculine values as strength, power and stamina'.<sup>87</sup> These were values shared by the classes and thus these photographs do more than present working-class bodies; they demonstrate Donald's belief that he shared the same 'sporting gaze' as those men who were away from him.<sup>88</sup> Boxing was a male activity that united those within the working-class community of Notting Dale and the Rugby men who had settled there.<sup>89</sup> Donald, in particular, believed that the working-class boxer was one of 'our heroes' because he had the 'courage and endurance ... after a day's work, fighting gruelling rounds'.<sup>90</sup>

It is possible that Donald selected these images because middle-class men admired working-class male bodies. This gender inscription helped them to subordinate and tame their growing fears of class antagonism and social threat. Equally, the images were intended to strengthen and manage a specific homosocial network that had cross-class underpinnings through drawing upon the middle-class fascination with sport and the respect given to those who excelled at it.<sup>91</sup> Boxing celebrated not just physical strength but also training, discipline and fair play. Boxers themselves were highly regarded local figures in working-class urban districts.<sup>92</sup> Donald's decision to include these photographs therefore demonstrates his intimate knowledge of working-class men and the significance of boxing to both the Rugby Club and Notting Dale. The Club ran their own, highly popular boxing club which trained local boys and men. Those now in the armed forces might have attended it on Tuesday and Friday evenings.<sup>93</sup> There were regular competitions between Rugby Club members and other London clubs, and many well-known London boxers were noted to have come from the Rugby Club boxing ring.<sup>94</sup>

Boxing's appeal also drew upon the wider social significance of sport. It was often a very male space, a shared cultural reference point that crossed occupational and regional boundaries. The sport drew upon and built male friendships and celebrated their sense of community and camaraderie.<sup>95</sup> This was evident in the Rugby Club, not least because female club members were excluded from the fights. This culture offered men the chance to come together at the side of the boxing ring and afterwards at the Club to discuss the highs and lows of matches and individual boxers. Spectating was always highly emotive and animated: men discussed fights beforehand and dissected them intensely afterwards.<sup>96</sup> In this way, sport homosociality was a 'cathartic outlet', enabling men to engage in rituals and practices beyond the home, family and work.<sup>97</sup> The ten photographs of local boxers included in the wartime circulars pulled Notting Dale men back to the Club through the boxing ring. Indeed, recipients were invited to turn away from their current homosocial world and instead take flight into the 'Memories of the Rugby Club Ring' (see Figure 3).<sup>98</sup> Thus, Club members were able to travel back in time and space through their remembrance of boxing fights, and the inclusion of these photographs in the circulars demonstrates how the cross-class homosociality developed at the Club was one of cultural exchange and shared interests.<sup>99</sup>





**Figure 3:** From 'The Rugby Club: Notting Hill', 1917 (fifth circular), Rugby School Archive. Reproduced by kind permission of Rugby School Archives & Special Collections. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

The portrait photographs of boxers again show how some sporting working men were comfortable displaying and posing their bodies. According to Daniel Alsarve, male spectatorship of photographs strengthens homosocial bonds because sporting figures become 'potential role models' who 'are more complete, powerful and desirable male objects'.<sup>100</sup> Charles Allum was one such working-class figure and, for Donald, illustrative of the Club's hegemonic masculinity. He was pictured more than any other club member but was also shown as a sporting hero (see Figure 3). Allum's significance in Donald's immediate friendship network was reinforced when Donald notified



recipients of the 1917 circular that the thirty-eight-year old was missing in action. He reported that Allum was last seen ‘knocking out huns with his fists – a dramatic end, if end it is, for a grand old fighter’, but was nevertheless ‘the gentlest and most loyal of friends’.<sup>101</sup> Allum did not return to the club or his family. He accidentally ran into the German trenches unarmed, after coming across a German patrol group, and was killed in action in September 1918.<sup>102</sup>

### Touch and intimacy in the homosocial album

Donald’s inclusion of pre-war snapshots in his circular offers a unique chance to investigate how Rugby Club members visually expressed and performed their friendships. These camp snapshots reveal more than mere posing and smiling. They show how gendered emotions were enacted to the camera by the men caught in the frame. As Joanne Bourke has noted of this period, ‘we know remarkably little about the gestures, play and carriage of the mass of boys and men’.<sup>103</sup> Photographs can therefore assist with the task of identifying how male bodies inscribed friendship within a homosocial setting. Understanding working-class men’s experiences of friendship through this medium is especially important, as philanthropic sources are ‘frustratingly silent when we try to access plebeian experiences. We have no accounts originating directly from working-class men’.<sup>104</sup> Instead, working-class homosocial experiences are often filtered through the words of middle-class club workers.<sup>105</sup> Photographs can help scholars to move beyond this frustration.

By the end of the nineteenth century, new technologies had not only made it easier for photographs to be taken but also encouraged people to pose and smile in ways that they had not necessarily done previously. Improved shutter speeds assisted with this and helped to make domestic photography fresh, dynamic and playful.<sup>106</sup> Nicole Hudgins has argued that some working-class people were familiar with the playfulness offered by photography, even when taken by an unknown photographer, because it gave them the agency to show their ‘individual skill, friendship[s] and growth’.<sup>107</sup> The Rugby Club’s use of domestic camera equipment meant that the circular ended up privileging smaller homosocial presentations. Staged photographs often caught working-class campers in small peer-to-peer groupings that centred on tent entrances or on men eating.<sup>108</sup> The photograph frame forced the men to stand close to one another, where the proximity of their bodies no doubt led them to touch others.

The most common way in which working men touched one another in the camp photographs was through a subtle gesture: the placement of a hand or hands on the shoulder.<sup>109</sup> Focusing on where hands were placed becomes important for reading how men touched and were touched. According to Pamela Gilbert ‘the hand was the principal acceptable contact between individuals beyond the first degree of relation, and usually the first (and for a while, only) zone of direct contact between those who would become mates’.<sup>110</sup> Often the hand over the shoulder led campers to touch shoulders and pull bodies together, creating chain-like expressions of male friendship.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, touch helped men to inscribe new friendships as more established relationships. There may have been an element in which men voluntarily placed hands-on other men because they were ‘seeking information’ about their friendships.<sup>112</sup>

Tactile expression between working-class men were also facilitated by sporting and game activities. The sporting touch arguably bonded men together through

character and fair play and thus provided a context for physical interaction. Historians have acknowledged that sport was a celebration of male physicality but have tended to concentrate on how success in sport rested on physical toughness and skill.<sup>113</sup> In contrast, these photographs show that sports and games legitimised holding, touching and physically engaging with another man's body. Some snapshots show hands holding ankles for the wheelbarrow race or young men's bodies wrapped around others for piggyback races.<sup>114</sup> The sporting touch was also shown to have violent potential. Gloveless hands were often shown clenched, poised to strike a blow. Boxing hands are accommodated in the Rugby Club's homosocial visual presentation because of its significance outlined above.<sup>115</sup>

While the reason why these men touched each other in the moment will never be known, tactile articulations of homosocial relations were clearly sanctioned within working-class masculinity.<sup>116</sup> Men repeated gendered poses and demeanours that they had seen and, in that moment, felt comfortable or prepared to inhabit publicly. They mirrored the rules and principles of the communities and networks that they came from. Thus, groups of working-class friends would have had to have felt comfortable with an audience observing their performances. An immediate observer of this tactile inscription was the photographer. As Beatriz Pichel has noted, the 'proximity between the bodies of the photographer and the photographed allowed them to acknowledge each other'.<sup>117</sup> This acknowledgment came from campers looking into and towards the camera. Faces, almost always smiling, often looked directly at the camera. Occasionally campers held material objects, like shaving equipment, cups or shooters.<sup>118</sup> The external audience would have included both working-class peers and Rugby men, showing how men's homosocial relationships were often made in a collective public space. At times, external audiences are made real by the presence of other men in the frame.<sup>119</sup> Elsewhere, snapshots of live sporting activities caught spectators, revealing how homosocial networks were made through presence and not just through active entanglements. Finally, there would have been another, external, audience for these snapshots: the developer.<sup>120</sup> Knowing all of this, working-class men staged acts of touch at the Rugby Club's camps.

Nevertheless, working-class men performed differently depending on who they shared the frame with. Physical acts of touch do not dominate between camp worker and camper. While peer-to-peer working-class snapshots generally contained a group of men, cross-class friendships were frequently captured in pairs, often doing something together, such as camp workers teaching working-class men and boys to chop wood, read books or shoot.<sup>121</sup> When read against other images in the circulars these show the active performance of philanthropic relationships. They are physically distanced, implying that, while cross-class homosocial interactions were possible, touching was the exception rather than the rule. The inscription of cross-class friendship, then, is one of shared experience, character development and trust.<sup>122</sup> These photographs suggest that bonding was achievable without physical intimacy.<sup>123</sup> In turn, they show that the Rugby Club's homosociality was fractured and contained multiple smaller friendship networks that reinforced class and social status and led to different experiences of intimacy.<sup>124</sup>

The absence of touch reflects the mode of friendly interaction deemed appropriate for club worker and member, where hierarchy and instruction was still very much in

play. The Rugby Club's homosocial networks were layered, multiple and ultimately informed by class. There are several reasons why distance was captured between middle-class club workers and working-class club members. First, language, customs and behaviours would have divided campers and camp workers from each other. While this does not imply social disconnection between the two socioeconomic groups, it does indicate that the Club was internally divided by class and, in some instances, age. In this all-male setting, Rugby men were still the leaders and ultimately in charge. Even though Notting Dale men and boys were likely to have known most of the middle-class men who accompanied them to New Romney, cross-class relationships retained classed power dynamics. After all, club workers had the power to send campers home for infringing rules such as breaking curfews, leaving their tents at night or going to the village without permission.<sup>125</sup> Rugby men never sought to eradicate class distinctions and their social authority. Instead, they hoped that, through personal, reciprocal contact, rich and poor would get to know and understand one another. Second, Rugby men might have created physical distance between themselves and working-class men for fear of being named effete or homosexual, avoiding concerns of 'class tourism and sexual colonialism'.<sup>126</sup>

Third, it is important to remember that club workers were friends to club members but not pals. Donald appears to have understood that there was a currency to club friendships and that some male worlds were more dominant in soldiers' imaginings of the Rugby Club. Bourke has argued that in working-class communities, individuals defined their relationships to one another and to institutions by whether they were 'dense or diverse, loose or strong, frequent or infrequent'.<sup>127</sup> Club members were likely to know one another through neighbourhood and kinship networks (families, work, etc.).<sup>128</sup> Their relationships were likely to embody intimacy differently from those with the club workers. When writing to them Donald understood their Notting Dale comrades to be their 'pals'.<sup>129</sup> In contrast, the term 'friend' was reserved for middle-class club workers. For instance, he always signed his letters 'Your Friend'.<sup>130</sup>

This hierarchy of relationships can be further reinforced by a chance encounter with a New Romney snapshot taken by Donald in 1911 but not included in the printed circulars. In Figure 4, three men in summer wear are encased in a playful hug; none quite looks into the camera, but their tight grasp dominates the frame. This image appeared in Ronald 'Ronnie' Poulton's memorial biography by his father, Sir Edward Bagnall Poulton.<sup>131</sup> The caption informs us that the three men are Dick Dugdale, Evers and Poulton, three important club workers, and that they are caught in 'A Triple Embrace'. These upper middle-class men are willingly and enthusiastically performing their affection for one another. All of these men appear to be comfortable with another – and that includes the photographer, Donald.

The level of physical intimacy, when compared with pictures already discussed, is far more intense. This photograph's absence from the circular implies that Donald closed down specific articulations of homosocial worlds and did not display his immediate friendship group. However, his attachment to Poulton was not concealed from working-class recipients. As Pichel noted, 'photographs help enact feelings of grief and to process mourning during the war'.<sup>132</sup> Two images mediate Donald's emotions following Poulton's death. The first is a portrait of Poulton included in the circular after his death in 1917. The second appeared in the final circular and shows Poulton



**Figure 4:** From Edward Bagnall Poulton, *The Life of Ronald Poulton by His Father* (London, 1919). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

supposedly asleep on the New Romney beach; Donald captioned it ‘ONE WE WILL NEVER FORGET’.<sup>133</sup> Poulton clearly touched him more than any other person connected to the camp. In circulating his likeness to other men of the Rugby Club, Donald was making known that Poulton was a lost close friend he did not want to forget.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how Donald used photographs during the First World War to articulate, maintain and compose his homosocial relationships with men away from

the Rugby Club. The photographs documented not only male bonding in action but also their social performances. On an individual level, the images discussed in this article cannot reveal the truth of homosocial networks; nor can it be revealed through Donald's circulars. Nevertheless, photographs have the ability to show us how homosociability was inscribed. Images reveal how men and boys bonded with each other, among their class groups, and to some extent across class divides. The dominance of working-class peer-to-peer groups emphasis that particular homosocial network would have been preferred by local men away from the Club and that Donald was aware of this. However, he felt the need to make and send the circular, in order to insert himself into a male world he was removed from. As he remarked in his autobiography, 'The nightmare of the War was intensified for schoolmasters and club-leaders who had known generations of boys'.<sup>134</sup> He watched as men went off to fight. He found that some did not return. The curation of the Rugby Club wartime circular helped to keep these men and their clubs alive.

Donald used photographs to recover a homosocial world temporarily broken by war. Those selected arguably reaffirmed Donald's projected homosocial vision and serve to remind us that Donald was the architect of a homosocial act that invited local working-class men back to the Club. He decided which experiences were to be shown and which were denied to them. Other homosocial performances are missing. Photographs contained within a brown leather suitcase at the Rugby School archive show that some pictures did not make it into the circular because there were technological imperfections caused by overexposure. The photographs that did appear in the circular, however, are not jumbled among the Club's 140-year photographic collection, perhaps implying that they were retained by Donald for his own personal archive or were returned to people who had initially shared them.

There is the possibility that there was a further visual staging of these photographs. Towards the end of his life Donald wrote an unpublished memoir, which charted his time and work at the Rugby Club.<sup>135</sup> He reported that, after the war, the Rugby Club built a cottage for young children, women and the elderly to get clean air at New Romney. A plaque was placed there that read 'May you who have come home to find health and life remember those who gave up life and love, for love of you'.<sup>136</sup> In the cottage, photographs of the 'Old Guard' were hung next to the names of the 117 Notting Dale men who went to fight and did not return, thus being represented again at Donald's preferred homosocial setting, the camp.<sup>137</sup> We cannot be certain if the photographs sent during the war were those placed in the cottage, but the decision to create an additional visual memorial gestures to the significance placed by Donald and the Rugby Club on the homosocial world of New Romney. His hopes that the men of the Club would be reunited at camp were arguably fulfilled, but the reality of the horror of war was brought to the first post-war camp when one of the men had an emotional and physical breakdown during the night. Donald recalled that he took the unnamed man home, and that he was subsequently placed in an asylum. A week later he was dead.<sup>138</sup> The war, a different emotional register, had invaded the camp.

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