

Underground London: From Cave Culture Follies to the Avant-Garde

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London has had a long love affair with grottos, cellars, caves, and basements. This might be explained in various ways. One could argue that the preference for deep and dark spots reflects the longing of metropolis-man to regain the status of cave-man. One may even attempt a Jungian dream interpretation.¹ Here however we concentrate on the phenomenon itself, not on possible explanations or interpretations.

The Creed Collection

My research into the subject has been facilitated by a superb discovery in British Library collections. At pressmark 1888.b.6 may be found the ‘G. Creed Collection’, fourteen large folio volumes of signs of taverns in England and Wales, alphabetically arranged (vol. 1: ABB – BEA; vol. 2: BEA – BOA; vol. 3: BOA – CAT; vol. 4: CHA – CRA; vol. 5: CRA – DIA; vol. 6: DOG – FEA; vol. 7: FIN – GOO; vol. 8: GOO – HOG; vol. 9: HOI – KNA; vol. 10: LAMB – MOS; vol. 11: MOST – POP; vol. 12: POT – SHO; vol. 13: SIM – TUR; vol. 14: UNI – Z), with printed and manuscript notes, rare illustrations, newspaper cuttings, and autograph letters, covering the period 1628 to 1858 (the year in which the volumes were received by the then Library of the British Museum). Nothing appears to be known of Mr Creed: his first initial is given in the General Catalogue as ‘G.’, with no further information.²

Eighteenth-Century Folly

At Cross Deep, overlooking Radnor Gardens and the Thames close to Twickenham, is a public house named Pope’s Grotto. Alexander Pope had moved to Twickenham in 1719 and lived there for twenty-five years on a small plot of land on the banks of the river. If he was not writing or translating poetry, he was involved with garden design. Little survives of his own garden. We do know from drawings and descriptions that it perfectly embodied the landscaping principles espoused in his ‘Epistle to Burlington’. To Pope, landscape gardening was an act of the imagination expressing his inner ‘romantic’ impulses.³

¹ Jung’s famous cave dream runs thus: ‘I was in a house I did not know, which had two storeys. It was “my house”. I found myself in the upper storey, where there was a kind of salon furnished with fine old pieces in Rococo style. [...] Descending the stairs, I reached the ground floor. There everything was much older. I realised that this part of the house must date from about the fifteenth or sixteenth century. [...] I came upon a heavy door and opened it. Beyond it, I discovered a stone stairway that led down into a cellar. Descending again, I found myself in a beautifully vaulted room which looked exceedingly ancient. [...] I knew that the walls dated from Roman times. [...] I looked more closely at the floor. It was of stone slabs and in one of these I discovered a ring. When I pulled it, the stone slab lifted and again I saw a stairway of narrow stone steps leading down to the depths. These, too, I descended and entered a low cave cut into rock. Thick dust lay on the floor and in the dust were scattered bones and broken pottery, like remains of a primitive culture. I discovered two human skulls, obviously very old, and half disintegrated. Then I awoke.’ C. Jung, *Man and his Symbols* ([S.l.]: Dell Publishing, 1964), pp. 42–4.

² Referred to in Philip Norman, *London Signs and Inscriptions* (London, 1893); Bryant Lillywhite, *London Coffee Houses: A Reference Book of Coffee Houses of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries* (London, 1963); J. Holden MacMichael, *The Story of Charing Cross and its Immediate Neighbourhood* (London, 1906).

³ See publications such as Anthony Beckles Willson, ‘Alexander Pope’s Grotto in Twickenham’, *Garden History*, xxvi (1998), pp. 31–59 or Greater London Council, *Alexander Pope’s Villa: Views of Pope’s Villa, Grotto and Garden, a Microcosm of the English Landscape* (London, 1980).

The bounds of his garden were concealed by dense thickets to create an enclosed irregular area containing monuments with both ancient and modern associations. At the eastern end of the garden stood the Shell Temple, a Rococo pleasure dome, and at the western side an obelisk was placed commemorating his mother. From the garden a passage ran beneath the London road and into a grotto located in Pope's basement. At the garden end the grotto looked out over a lawn towards the Thames and open country. When the doors were closed, it became a camera obscura reflecting thousands of images from the sparkling shells and bits of mirror in the grotto walls, a truly remarkable 'poetic' folly. In 1739, inspired by a visit to the Hotwell Spa at the base of the Avon Gorge, Pope developed an interest in geology and mining and in subsequent years he transformed his grotto, decorating it with ores, spars, mundic, stalactites, crystals, Bristol and Cornish diamonds, marbles, alabaster, etc. In 1740 he wrote some 'Verses on a Grotto by the River Thames at Twickenham, Composed of Marbles, Spars and Minerals', comparing it to a 'mine without a wish for gold'. For many critics, the grotto represents the idea of art imitating nature and is seen as a symbol reflecting Pope's life and development as a poet. His grotto was a personal obsession. In the context of this essay, however, the emphasis will be put on public underground places.

Maiden Lane

In Victorian London men had a decided taste for the underground. In this 'hole-and-corner epoch' cellars, shades and caves were the chosen resorts of boisterous spirits of all degrees and backgrounds. A tradition was upheld there whereby men were ranked by the number of bottles they could stow away at a sitting. There were Holes in the Wall, Bob's and Tom's, and Dirty Dick's; and there were famous places by the riverside, as near the level of the bed of the Thames as could be reached, where the dirt and gloom were the main attraction. The London cellars and caves represented the manners of the time — that is to say, sumptuous suppers, heavy drinking and naughty entertainment. The freedom to perform dirty songs and recitations was partly due to the fact that the audience and the actors were always composed of men only. With the growth of the music hall, the old cellar 'singing-rooms' would gradually disappear. *Evans's* in Covent Garden was the last to go and before that, one by one, went the *Cyder Cellar* in Maiden Lane, the *Coal Hole* in the Strand, and others. Of the three mentioned, the *Cyder Cellar* at no. 20 Maiden Lane had the most notorious reputation.⁴

In all London there is probably no thoroughfare of equal brief length which can boast so many interesting associations as Maiden Lane, which stretches between Southampton and Bedford Streets in the vicinity of Covent Garden. Although Maiden Lane was never a fashionable address, a number of distinguished people have lived there. Around 1647 Sir Cornelius Vermuyden, the Dutch engineer employed by the 4th Earl of Bedford on the drainage of the Bedford Level, occupied a house on the site of the present no. 28. Andrew Marvell had lodgings here in 1677; Voltaire made it his headquarters on his visit to London in 1727; it was the scene of the birth of Joseph Mallord William Turner in 1775; and while one local tavern was the rendezvous of the conspirators against the life of William III, the *Cyder Cellar* had become second home to the Norfolk-born classical scholar Richard Porson (1759–1808). The latter was famous for his memory (in spite of the drink). Hundreds of anecdotes survive attesting to his skill, most of them strongly suggesting that he thoroughly enjoyed displaying himself in this way. Some such stories have him behaving almost like a circus oddity, reciting lengthy passages of Greek from memory, sometimes backwards.

The *Cyder Cellar*, reaching the height of its fame or disrepute in the early decennia of the nineteenth century, had already been a home of music and song for well over a century. At

⁴ Henry Benjamin Wheatley, *London Past and Present: Its History, Associations, and Traditions. Based upon the Handbook of London by the late Peter Cunningham* (London, 1891), vol. ii, pp. 456 and following.

this time it had a reputation for devilled kidneys, oysters, Welsh rarebits, cigars, brandy, brown stout and cider, all of the very best quality. The entertainment was the opposite. Though it purveyed a certain amount of good songs it revelled in dirt and sordid horror, but it was enormously popular and always packed with men eagerly anticipating bottles and bums.

A name closely connected with the early success of the Cyder Cellar, a man who to a large extent determined the tone of the entertainment there, was that of Holborn-born George Alexander Stevens (1710-1780), the strolling actor who eventually attained a place in the company of Covent Garden theatre. Stevens was an indifferent actor but an excellent lecturer. Building on that success he devised his 'Lecture upon Heads', first delivered on 30 April 1764 at the Haymarket. Standing beside a table covered with dozens of papier-mâché busts and wig blocks, together with a few props, he gave a two-hour satirical monologue on such varied characters as a Cherokee chief, Alexander the Great, a London blood, a Billingsgate fishwife, a jockey, a conjuror, a Frenchman, a Spaniard, a Dutchman, and a Methodist parson. This one-man show was an immediate success. Stevens took it to Dublin, Manchester, Bath, and Bristol in 1764 and repeated it in several London theatres in 1765. In following years he performed many times in London and all over the provinces, making changes to keep the entertainment topical and in a vain attempt to outwit imitators. It is said that he crossed the Atlantic with the Lecture, but performances in America were almost certainly by an imitator, of which there were many throughout the English-speaking world. The Lecture was first published in 1765 and there were many more editions, authorized or not.⁵

To Stevens's displeasure, other performers capitalized on his successful formula. Prior to the affluence which he won by his lecture tours he had frequently to do 'penance in jail for the debts of the tavern'. He was a leading member of all the great Bacchanalian clubs of his day and was a popular song-writer, especially known for his bawdy drinking and patriotic songs. Many of those ballads and songs were collected in his *Songs, Comic and Satyrical* (1788). The following ballad entitled 'The Wine Vault' — on the tune of 'The hounds are all out' — reflects the general atmosphere of the *Cyder Cellar* and associated clubs and taverns. Of the eleven verses these are the first and final ones:⁶

Contented I am, and contented I'll be,
For what can this world more afford,
Than a lass that will sociably sit on my knee,
And a Cellar as sociably stor'd,
My brave boys.

...

'Tis my will when I die, not a tear shall be shed,
No Hic Jacet be cut on my stone;
But pour on my coffin a bottle of red,
And say that His drinking is done,
My brave boys.

⁵ George Alexander Stevens, *The Celebrated Lecture on Heads* (London, 1765).

⁶ George Alexander Stevens, *Songs, Comic and Satiric* (London, 1801), pp.42-4. Hic Jacet: 'here lies'.

Mock Trials

Hackney-born Renton Nicholson (1809–1861), called the Lord Chief Baron, was famous for his ‘Judge and Jury Society’ which conducted mock trials first in his own *Garrick’s Head* and later in the *Coal Hole* and *Cyder Cellar*.⁷ Among the miscellaneous attractions of the 1840s and early 1850s the Judge-and-Jury shows, as they were called, held a conspicuous position, and after the theatres and other places of amusement were closed, attracted audiences of a class composed chiefly of men-about-town, revellers and nightbirds. The entertainment consisted of thinly veiled skits in the form of mock trials on the society scandals of the day that were conducted with sham solemnity. This grotesque parody of the legal procedure was often spicy if not obscene.

Nicholson was the father of this class of entertainment. The room where the *causes célèbres* were conducted seated about three hundred people, and was fitted up with the customary appointments of a regular court, that is to say, the bench for his lordship, and seats for the counsel on either side, the jury and the witnesses. The Baron himself, a corpulent, jovial-looking personage, took his seat upon the bench promptly upon the assembling of the parties, and opened the proceedings by calling for a glass of brandy and water with a cigar, which was the signal for counsel for the plaintiff to begin. In 1860, the publishing house of George Vickers brought out the Baron’s reminiscences in a work entitled *The Lord Chief Baron Nicholson: An Autobiography*.

In the *Creed Collection* (vol. 8) a number of adverts for the *Garrick Head and Town Hotel* have been collected and put together. They make interesting reading. Here is one of those invitations to take part in ‘Nicholson’s Late Lectures’:

Catering, as we do in this great hotel, for the body, we lose not our consideration for the mind.

Lusty chop and rosy cheek,
Potatoes and Pose Plastique;
Tableaux Vivans, clothed with rigour,
Steak a shilling, that’s the figure.
After supper, up the stair,
View the breathing Statues fair,
Hear the Lecture and the Song,
Push the genial glass along.

Mr Nicholson was the first to embody Eatables with Eloquence, and Drinkables with Debate. He now begs to induct the Public to Poetry and Potatoes; such Poetry, and such Potatoes — no disease in either. Come, then, to Supper: you will be gratified ... He is assisted by Vocalists of the first pretensions; and he can with safety make this proud boast, that he is the first Public Lecturer who ever embodied the themes of Poetry, Sculpture, Painting, and Music, in one attractive whole, aided, too, by Illustrations of Masculine Symmetry, and Feminine Loveliness.

If it was Richard Wagner who introduced the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* into European cultural history, it has to be stressed that he had a worthy predecessor in the remarkable figure of Renton [Baron] Nicholson.

⁷ Renton Nicholson, *Autobiography of a Fast Man* (London, 1863).

The Cave of Harmony

Strasbourg-born Gustave Doré (1832–1883) was an outstanding and prolific illustrator who, during his lifetime, was highly appreciated both in Britain and in his native France. From 1856 onwards, he worked as much for London as for Paris publishers. From 1868, the ‘Doré Gallery’ in New Bond Street displayed examples of his work in every genre. He also contributed regularly to the *Illustrated London News*. Doré often visited London between 1868 and 1879, but never settled in the city or learned any English. He teamed up with London-born playwright and journalist (William) Blanchard Jerrold (1826–1884) who himself spent much of his time in Paris as correspondent for several English papers, and they published *London: A Pilgrimage* in 1872.

The book is a hellish vision of East End poverty and Doré’s prints are both magnificently evocative and yet very Parisian in style and execution. Doré’s London, however, with its sharp contrasts between the rich world of the affluent and the apocalyptic misery of the underclass, perfectly captured the public mood at the time. Of the series of social investigations undertaken by writers and graphic artists in the Victorian era, the *Pilgrimage* had the greatest immediate impact and has had the most enduring appeal for both the public and for later artists. Vincent van Gogh’s admiration for the London illustrations led him to paint a version of Doré’s haunting image of dehumanized convicts circling a bleak exercise yard.

In chapter twenty of the *Pilgrimage* entitled ‘London at Play’, Jerrold refers to a cellar which enjoyed a notorious reputation in its time, the so-called *Cave of Harmony* in Gower Street:⁸

The Cave of Harmony was a cellar for shameful song-singing — where members of both Houses, the pick of the Universities, and the bucks of the Row, were content to dwell in indecencies for ever. When there was a burst of unwonted enthusiasm, you might be certain that some genius of the place had soared to a happy combination of indecency with blasphemy. The horrid fun was at its height in that famous season when Sam Hall took the town by storm: the said Sam being a rogue of the deepest dye, who growled blasphemous staves, over the back of a chair, on the eve of his execution.

‘Sam Hall’ is an old English folk song which prior to the mid-nineteenth century was called ‘Jack Hall’.⁹ Jack or John Hall was born of poor parents who lived in a court off Grays Inn Road, London, and who sold him for a guinea at the age of seven to be a climbing boy. Such boys (and girls) swept chimneys by scrambling up inside them. The young Hall soon ran away from this disagreeable occupation, and made a living as a pickpocket. Later he turned to housebreaking, for which he was whipped in 1692 and sentenced to death in 1700. He was reprieved, then released, but returned to crime and was re-arrested in 1702 for stealing luggage from a stagecoach. This time, he was branded on the cheek and imprisoned for two years. Finally, having been taken in the act of burgling a house in Stepney, he was hanged at Tyburn on 17 December 1707.

Hall’s memory was most powerfully preserved in song. The ballad *Jack Hall* was probably contemporary with his death, but broadside and oral transmission gave it a remarkably long life. It was reprinted as a broadside in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. In the 1840s music hall singer W. G. Ross revised the song, changing the name to *Sam Hall* in the process. Ross used

⁸ Blanchard Jerrold, *London: A Pilgrimage*, illustrated by Gustave Doré; with an introduction by Peter Ackroyd (London, 2006), p. 198. Jerrold’s *Life of Gustave Doré* was published posthumously in 1891.

⁹ www.folkinformations.org/songs/

to be a popular singer of the long descriptive songs of that day — some of his songs took half-an-hour to execute and detailed the entire plot of a novel or a drama. Jack Hall's defiance in face of the rope in the ballad made him the archetype of the condemned man who 'died game':

My name it is Jack Hall, chimney sweep, chimney sweep,
My name it is Jack Hall, chimney sweep,
My name it is Jack Hall,
And I rob both great and small,
But my life must pay for all,
When I die, when I die
But my life must pay for all,
When I die.

Percival Leigh (1813–1889) was an enormously popular satirist and contributor to *Punch* from the day of its formation. His best work appeared in 1849, *Ye manners and customs of ye Englyshe*. Originally appearing serially in *Punch*, his application of ancient phraseology to modern affairs made a decided hit. It is a clever, sarcastic chronicle of prevailing fashions and opinions, and its enlarged edition of 1876 was still in print in 1949. On 10 March 1848 he noted the following account of an evening's entertainment in the *Cyder Cellar*.¹⁰ Once more, the ballad of Sam Hall performed by Ross took centre stage. The singer is introduced in the following manner:

... the thing that did most take me was to see and hear one Ross sing the song of Sam Hall the chimney-sweep, going to be hanged: for he had begrimed his muzzle to look unshaven, and in rusty black clothes, with a battered old Hat on his crown and a short Pipe in his mouth, did sit upon the platform, leaning over the back of a chair: so making believe that he was on his way to Tyburn.

Once Ross had settled, he started his ballad:

And then he did sing to a dismal Psalm-tune, how that his name was Sam Hall and that he had been a great Thief, and was now about to pay for all with his life; and thereupon he swore an Oath, which did make me somewhat shiver, though divers laughed at it. Then, in so many verses, how his Master had badly taught him and now he must hang for it: how he should ride up Holborn Hill in a Cart, and the Sheriffs would come and preach to him, and after them would come the Hangman; and at the end of each verse he did repeat his Oath. Last of all, how that he should go up to the Gallows; and desired the Prayers of his Audience, and ended by cursing them all round. Methinks it had been a Sermon to a Rogue to hear him, and I wish it may have done good to some of the Company. Yet was his cursing very horrible, albeit to not a few it seemed a high Joke; but I do doubt that they understood the song.

In the first chapter of *The Newcomes* (1855) William Makepeace Thackeray also mentions this *Cave of Harmony*, although his picture of 'The Cave' seems to have been drawn from the features of many different places of entertainment.¹¹ In fact, at a Christie's South Kensington sale of 8 December 1995, Thackeray's 'The cave of harmony' (medium: pen, ink and watercolour) was auctioned as lot 291.

¹⁰ Percival Leigh, *God's Englishmen: The Forty Drawings from 'Manners and Customs of Ye Englyshe'* (London, 1948), p. 15.

¹¹ William Makepeace Thackeray, 'Colonel Newcome in the Cave of Harmony', in *Masters of Literature: Thackeray* (London, 1909), pp. 80-9.

The Bride of Frankenstein

The name of the *Cave of Harmony* was not lost forever and would reappear during the 1920s in London. Its foundation was due to no less than the 'Bride of Frankenstein' herself. Lewisham-born and Oscar-nominated actress Elsa Lanchester (1902–1986) is perhaps best remembered for her role as the monster's wife in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Born in London as Elizabeth Sullivan she came of a bohemian background. Her parents James (Shamus) Sullivan and Edith (Biddy) Lanchester were active socialists who, as a matter of principle, rejected the institution of marriage. Her mother had actually been committed to an asylum in 1895 by her father and older brothers because of her unmarried state with James. The incident received worldwide press as the 'Lanchester Kidnapping Case'. Her cause was taken up by fellow members of the Social Democratic Federation (she had been secretary to Eleanor Marx) and her release was secured when she was found not to be insane.

Unsurprisingly, Elsa was brought up in a family environment that stressed rebellion and nonconformity. She expressed a great desire to become a classical dancer and, at age of ten, was enrolled by her mother at the famed Isadora Duncan's 'Bellevue School' in Paris in 1912. In 1920 she made her London debut in a music hall act as an Egyptian dancer. About the same time she founded the Children's Theatre in Soho and taught there for several years. In 1924 she and her partner, Harold Scott, opened a nightclub called the *Cave of Harmony*. They performed one-act plays of Pirandello and Chekhov and sang cabaret songs. Performances at the Cave were semi-improvised and often included odd ditties such as 'Rat Catcher's Daughter' that Lanchester had dug up out of the magnificent resources of the British Library.

The *Cave of Harmony* became a popular meeting place for London artists and intellectuals, including H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and James Whale (who would direct *The Bride of Frankenstein*). A local journalist was the first to immortalize the 'naughty lady' in song, fatally struck by her bronze hair and her brassy behaviour. His words make one wish to have known her:¹²

I may be fast, I may be loose,
I may be easy to seduce.
I may not be particular
To keep the perpendicular.
But all my horizontal friends
Are Princes, Peers and Reverends.
When Tom or Dick or Bertie call,
You'll find me strictly vertical!

Simultaneously, Elsa Lanchester joined a group of radical socialists called the '1917 Club' and became something of their mascot. It fixed her image: a bohemian socialist with loose morals, outrageous behaviour, and brightly coloured unmentionables (the famous pink drawers she claimed never to have owned). Geoffrey Dunlap wrote bitterly about her:¹³

Pink drawers alas — why should her drawers be pink
Their colour gives me furiously to think —
Pink drawers — and do they never turn red
Flushed at their mistress' sin while she's in bed.
No they are pink, and peonies in their fair hue
Their innocence remains forever new.

¹² Elsa Lanchester, *A Gamut of Girls: Memoir* (Santa Barbara, 1988), p. 14.

¹³ *Doggerel Magazine: Weekly Magazine of Comic Verse and Bawdy Songs*, vol. i, no. 2 (24 July 2000).

During a 1926 comic performance in the 'Midnight Follies' at London's *Metropole*, a member of the British Royal family walked out as she sang, 'Please Sell No More Drink to My Father'.

Elsa closed her nightclub in 1928 as her film career began in earnest. She later noted that art was 'a word that cloaked oceans of naughtiness', and she had her share of it, working as a nude model by day and a theatrical impressario by night. Her biography is a long discourse of the wildness of London during the Roaring Twenties. Years later, when she was married to Charles Laughton (who only revealed his homosexuality after they were wed) and had established herself as a respectable presence in Hollywood, she would still be singing the bawdy songs she loved so much, numbers with such unforgettable titles as 'If You Peek In My Gazebo' and 'Fiji Fanny'.

The Avant-Garde

The *Cave of the Golden Calf* at no. 9 Heddon Street was England's first real 'Cabaret Club'. It opened in 1912, in the basement of a cloth warehouse at Heddon Street, just off Regent Street. Its creator was Frida Strindberg, a wealthy bohemian and cultural impressario with a passion for the arts and contacts in most European capitals.¹⁴ She intended her club to be a meeting place for writers and artists, an avant-garde rival to the nearby *Café Royal* where Oscar Wilde once was one of the regulars. The model was the *Kabarett Fledermaus* in Strindberg's native Vienna.

The concept of cabaret was a Continental one and Frida Strindberg was very much a product of the European avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Born in Austria as the daughter of the editor of the *Wiener Zeitung*, Frida Uhl (1872–1943) worked as a writer and translator in Vienna. In 1893, twenty years of age, she met 43-year old Swedish writer and dramatist August Strindberg (1849–1912) and they soon married in spite of her father's disapproval. She at once tried to organize a production of his work in England, and took his financial affairs in hand. They had a daughter together. Strindberg did not approve of the active role Frida was taking in his business affairs, and the marriage ended in divorce in 1895. Frank Wedekind (1864–1918), the German playwright who in his work laid bare the shams of morality in reference to sex in his time, was the father of Frida's second child. She sent her children to be cared for by her parents. With a later lover, the German poet Hans Heinz Ewers (1871–1943), she started the first German cabaret in Berlin in 1900.

At the fin de siècle, Vienna was a major centre for arts and culture, the most exciting period in the capital's cultural history. The literary and artistic movement known as 'Jung Wien' (Young Vienna) was composed of such remarkable artists as Gustav Mahler, Arthur Schnitzler, Gustav Klimt, Adolf Loos, and others. Frida was closely involved with several writers of the Young Vienna movement, such as the poet Peter Altenberg (1849–1912) for whom she organized a subscription, and the journalist and outstanding satirist Karl Kraus (1874–1936) whom she convinced to sponsor a reading of Wedekind's *Pandora's Box*. Her affair with the writer Werner von Oesteren was a particularly stormy one. She threatened him on two separate occasions with a revolver. Details of this relationship were made public in 1905 when she sued him for harassing a detective she had hired to follow him. In 1908 she fired a gun in a Viennese hotel on New Year's Day. This may have been an attempt to take her life. The event caused such publicity in her native town that she decided to move to London.

¹⁴ Monica J. Strauss, *Cruel Banquet: The Life and Loves of Frida Strindberg* (New York, 2000).

To create the artistic mood of her London club, Frida commissioned several young British artists to carry out work. Among them were Jacob Epstein, Eric Gill and Wyndham Lewis. Here, Lewis's jagged patterns mark out the club's character as a futuristic and modern-minded one. Ezra Pound admired her achievement. Other luminaries who frequented the establishment included Katherine Mansfield, Ford Madox Ford, and of course the ever-present Augustus John. The *Cave* attracted the more outrageously dressed of London's bohemian set, the mad, bad and decadent. Here guests could enjoy avant-garde cabaret performances, music, song and dance with drinks served until dawn. The club presented new music from Schoenberg to ragtime, short plays, art exhibits and champagne tango nights. The *Cave* went bankrupt in 1914, but not before Strindberg herself had become disappointed by its failure as an avant-garde and artistic venture. It proved nevertheless to be an influential venture, which introduced the concept of cabaret to London. It provided a model for the generation of nightclubs that came after it in the 1920s. After closure of the *Cave*, Frida left for the United States, where she quickly secured a job with Fox Film. In 1937, she published a memoir entitled *Marriage with Genius*.

During the 2005 Edinburgh Festival the atmosphere of the *Cave of the Golden Calf* was successfully revived in a series of evening cabarets and club nights in the elegant art deco Edwardian ballroom of the *Royal Scots Club*. Sitting at candle-lit tables, the audience enjoyed supper and drinks during the show and were presented with a cabaret programme that consisted of an eclectic blend of singers, musicians, burlesque and vaudeville performers from London and around the world. One of the more remarkable performances was that of the storyteller Coco, also known as La Céline, a Parisian Madame in pink satin and leopard skin stockings. Frida would have approved of her.

There was a dark side to the cave-dominated existence of avant-garde artists. No. 39 Dean Street, Soho, was the location of the *Caves de France*.¹⁵ It was a long ground-floor bar which hosted many bohemian artists and drinkers in the twilight of their careers. It was a place of nostalgia and regret, of drinkers, drifters and fading reputations. Nina Hamnett, the former 'Queen of Bohemia', was no longer the woman she once had been, scrounging drinks, a drunken wreck hoping to pick up a sailor for the night and bore him to death with the stories of her Parisian days. In 1914 she had settled in the Montparnasse Quarter in Paris. On her first night in the bohemian community she went to the café *La Rotonde* where the man at the next table introduced himself as 'Modigliani, painter and Jew'. She moved in the circle of Pablo Picasso, Sergei Diaghilev and Jean Cocteau. Unconventional and openly bisexual, she drank heavily, kept numerous lovers and close associations within the artistic community. Nina became a well-known bohemian personality throughout Paris and modelled for many artists. During her 40-year career, Hamnett also worked with Roger Fry assisting him with the avant-garde productions of fabrics, clothes, murals, furniture, rugs, and the like. In 1932 she published *Laughing Torso*, a tale of her bohemian life, which became a bestseller. Alcoholism would overtake her many talents and a tragic 'Queen of Bohemia' spent a good part of the last few decades of her life at the bar. Nina Hamnett died on Sunday, 16 December 1956, after falling out of her apartment window and being impaled on the fence forty feet below. The great debate has always been whether or not it was a suicide attempt or merely a drunken accident. Her last words were, 'Why don't they let me die?'

In her novel *The Old Man and Me* (1964) Elaine Dundy describes the *Caves* (pronounced as 'calves') as a

... sort of coal-hole in the heart of Soho ... a dead-ended subterranean tunnel ... in an atmosphere almost solid with failure.¹⁶

¹⁵ David Hugh, *The Fitzrovia: A Portrait of Bohemian Society, 1900-1955* (London, 1988), p. 174.

¹⁶ Eliane Dundy, cited by Daniel Farson, *Soho in the Fifties* (London, 1987), p. 53.

Two doors further down the street was a private drinking club known as the *Colony Room* (also known as *Muriel's*) located at the top of a flight of 'shabby and disgraceful stairs' in a smallish room with faded air and threadbare carpet. The club was founded and owned by Muriel Belcher. The painter Francis Bacon was a founding member, walking in the day after it opened in 1949. He was 'adopted' by Belcher as a 'daughter' and was allowed free drinks and £10 a week to bring in friends and rich patrons. The clientele was a mixture of Soho bohemians, often with public school accents, and an East End contingent, with broken noses, looking thuggish, but quite often gay. The room was notorious for its terrible decor: its bilious green walls were as famous as the club itself. The staircase that led to the club was described as foul-smelling and flanked by dustbins. The *Room* operated between 1948 and Muriel's death in 1979. She refused to serve people she did not like including Dennis Potter and Barry Humphries. Like so many other famous 'bohemian' areas, to weaker characters Soho could be a dangerous place, a graveyard of talent. Those suffering from 'Sohoitis' – in the words of *Poetry London* editor Tambimuttu – 'will stay there always day and night and get no work done ever'. The London avant-garde nevertheless had found its roots in the London underground where once, in the Victorian age, some of the most outrageous and yet, at times, innovative entertainment had been offered. In caves and cellars the twentieth-century avant-garde flourished – even if some of those caves were situated on the first floor. Such was the 'poetic folly' of the twentieth-century avant-garde.