

Review: Brett Kahr, *Tea with Winnicott*, (London: Karnac, 2016), ISBN 9781781815533

Nicola Sugden (University of Manchester)

Brett Kahr's *Tea with Winnicott* is a curious and highly original offering: a work of “imaginary non-fiction”,¹ wherein the child psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott (1896-1971) returns to his former home and consulting room for a posthumous interview with the author. Kahr – a psychotherapist and Winnicott scholar – outlines his inspiration for the book thus:

Students have a very great deal of difficulty grasping the totality of Winnicott's writings due, in part, to the sheer bulk. And I thought that it might be enjoyable to (...) ask Winnicott to tell us everything that we need to know about his life and about his work – all conveniently assembled in one portable book.²

On the count of being enjoyable this book is a success, written with a sense of playfulness fitting to a tribute to Winnicott. Somewhere between fan interview, classical philosophical dialogue and *Tischgespräch*, the conversational tone is more endearing than one might expect. In both content and form, it is in the small details that this book is at its most convincing. Sections are presented as “cups” (of tea) rather than chapters; Winnicott's secretary Joyce Coles recurs as a structuring device; and Alison Bechdel's charming illustrations, scattered through the text, invite only one criticism: that they are not more numerous. Likewise, it is the vivid images of Winnicott's busy Paddington Green clinic, of his tailor-made suits and Mrs Coles' impressive habit of simultaneous typing and smoking that bring the text to life: that make this history feel real, and that situate Winnicott's theories within the quotidian details of his life and practice. As an exposition of Winnicottian theory suitable for students, Kahr's

¹ Karnacology, “Tea with Winnicott: Brett Kahr and the Art of ‘Imaginary Non-Fiction’” (2016) <<https://karnacology.com/interviews/tea-with-winnicott-brett-kahr-and-the-art-of-imaginary-non-fiction/>>

² Ibid.

approach of following the chronology of a baby's life rather than the chronology of the development of Winnicott's thought results in a coherent and relatively concise overview – even if it is not until the eighth of ten chapters that this overview begins. Kahr follows Winnicott's thinking from a baby's conception and birth, through the three tasks of motherhood (holding, handling, and object-presenting) that the Good-Enough Mother undertakes, to the transitional objects and phenomena through which the child develops a relationship with the outside world. This human journey is succinctly summarised as development along the path from “absolute dependence” to “relative dependence” and “towards independence”. Newcomers to Winnicott will no doubt value this as an accessible introduction to his work.

The majority of the book, however, is given over to the life and times of Donald Winnicott, and it is here that the transcript style has its drawbacks. One failing is the lack of citations: these are most sorely missed in places where the author revises his previous work. Kahr's biography of Winnicott, for instance, presents the oft-repeated tale of Winnicott coming to Freud's works after experiencing difficulty in recalling his dreams.³ In his new volume, Winnicott's curiosity is piqued by critiques of Freud from a senior at St Barts⁴ Winnicott is also presented as being “the person responsible for Karnac Books”, having asked Harry Karnac to stock some of his own publications. Yet Kahr's 2014 tribute to Karnac states it differently: here it was Clifford Scott who suggested to the general bookseller that he stock Winnicott's work and thus set him on the path to specialise in psychological and psychoanalytical texts.⁵ No doubt such revisions will be explicitly addressed in Kahr's forthcoming works, but it is frustrating not to be referred to footnotes clearing up such matters within this text.

Failure to engage with wider historical themes is another unfortunate feature of the posthumous interview format. Kahr makes much of Winnicott's Wesleyan heritage and the theme of religious dissent and independent-mindedness, which leads to a number of religious

³ Brett Kahr., *D.W. Winnicott: A Biographical Portrait*, (Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press, 1996), p. 35

⁴ *Tea with Winnicott*, p. 53

⁵ Brett Kahr, “Harry Karnac (1919-2014): The Prince of Psychological Bookselling”, (2014) <<https://karnacology.com/hall-of-fame/harry-karnac/>>

references deployed with a disappointing lack of historicity: the Lollards become “the medieval equivalent” of the British Psychoanalytic Society’s Middle Group, John Wesley is said to have “anticipated modern social services”, and Thomas Cranmer was, according to Kahr’s Winnicott, “a reformer, like me, I suppose”.⁶ Queens and Paddington Green Children’s Hospitals are presented simply as “quite unique for the time”,⁷ and not contextualised within broader historical trends such as the rise of specialist hospitals and the emergence of modern conceptions of childhood. Historians of childhood would be further frustrated by the inclusion of defunct myths about Victorian childhood, when “people simply thought of children as smaller adults” and “wealthy parents abandoned their children to governesses and nannies, whereas those without financial resources left their children to roam the streets”.⁸

From a history of science perspective, the most disappointing trait of *Tea with Winnicott* is its implicit conception of the history of science as a march of progress past milestones erected by geniuses, powered by the curiosity of the scientific mind. Kahr’s conception of historical medicine is perhaps best encapsulated in his own words: “How the field has changed!”⁹ Kahr refers to a past when “no one knew anything about psychiatry” and when “we had no medicines to offer children, or none that really worked properly”,¹⁰ with no exploration of why this was (if indeed it was) the case, or why things may have changed. There is also a sense that this book seeks to exonerate Winnicott himself and psychoanalysis in general from charges of pseudoscience and scandal. This is most apparent in Kahr’s characterisation of early twentieth-century British psychoanalysis: “people thought analysts were no better than mumbo-jumbo witch doctors or trick-cyclists. Psychoanalysis had a terrible reputation, and poor Ernest Jones always had some sexual scandal hanging over his head”.¹¹ The persecution of genius is a common theme in both contemporary and historical psychoanalytic writing (not least in Winnicott’s own: in a funeral oration, he reminded mourners of the “storm of abuse”

⁶ Ibid., p. 31; p. 29; p. 36

⁷ *Tea with Winnicott*, p. 51

⁸ Ibid., p. 45; p. 22.

⁹ Ibid., p. 106

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 28; p. 47

¹¹ Ibid., p. 62

Jones suffered from the medical profession),¹² as is the shrugging off of the serious allegations of indecent assault brought against Jones in 1906. A more nuanced understanding of the incident has been offered by Philip Kuhn.¹³

Tea with Winnicott, then, is disappointing from a historian's point of view, but is a potentially useful introduction to Winnicott's theories. Whether new students of Winnicott will in fact turn to this book for such an introduction remains to be seen, and it may be that it will remain a novelty, a piece of "Winnicottiana" for those already inducted into the fold – though a thoroughly enjoyable one.

¹² London, Wellcome Library Archive, PP/DWW/A/C, "Words spoken by D.W. Winnicott at the funeral of Ernest Jones at Golders Green Crematorium 4pm Friday 14th February 1958", p. 4

¹³ Philip Kuhn, "Romancing with A Wealth of Detail, or Narratives of Dr Ernest Jones's 1906 Trial for Indecent Assault", *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* (2002), 3:4, pp. 344-378