It has been roughly 20 years since historian John Boswell dubbed St Aelred the ‘gay’ abbot of Rievaulx. While this naming may be located in a very particular time and place, over the past decade a considerable amount of work on the abbot has been produced. More recently, Brian Patrick McGuire has written a lengthy essay on the awareness of same-sex desire in Aelred, as well as a biography of the saint. In 1844, a lengthy study of Aelred of Rievaulx by John Dobree Dalgairns appeared in Newman’s Lives of the English Saints. Dalgairns was a colleague of the future cardinal at Littlemore, Newman’s pseudo-medieval, quasi-monastic community of friends. Littlemore was organized in the early 1840s, shortly after religious houses first reappeared in the post-Reformation Church of England. Dalgairns was received into the Roman Catholic Church on 29 September 1845 by Father Dominic the Passionist. The same clergyman converted Newman on 9 October of that year. Dalgairns later became a priest and a member of Newman’s Birmingham Oratory. In his biography of Aelred, Dalgairns emphasizes the abbot’s devoted friendships, his charity, kindness and compassion. St Aelred is important in considering the place of men in Anglo- and Roman Catholicism in the nineteenth century. Throughout this period and well into the twentieth century, many monks and abbots have adopted this name in religious life. In this essay, I wish to argue that an awareness of same-sex desire was present in Victorian historiography of medieval monasticism and in the practice of community foundation. The monastery in nineteenth-century England – particularly as it is seen in relation to models from the earlier Church – may be deemed a queer space.

Dalgairns’ portrait provided Victorian High Church men with a model for loving brotherhoods, both spiritual and emotional. I assert that
same-sex dynamics which have recently been suggested in the abbot’s works and *vita* were apparent to devout nineteenth- and early twentieth-century males who similarly desired close emotional relationships with other men. The high proportion of homoerotically inclined men within later Victorian Anglo- and Roman-Catholicism has been well established by scholars such as David Hilliard, John Reed and Douglass Shand-Tucci.³

John Dalgairns’ correspondence reflects his devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the connection he makes between the Eucharist and the community of religious friends. He writes: ‘I do not know that I have ever been to Mass without offering your [intention?] up with that adorable sacrifice.’⁴ ‘Every evening about 1/4 to 7 when I am kneeling in church before the Holy Sacrament I will pray for you.’⁵

I go to mass every morning at seven and it is very seldom that your name does not ascend with those of my friends at the time of the adorable sacrifice. God has connected us together when it seemed utterly improbable that we should ever be friends, after having sat together at the same table for years, without exchanging a word; and cannot but think that He does not intend to separate us permanently now.⁶

The doctrine of the Transubstantiation, the Real Presence of the body of Christ at the Eucharist, glorifies the male flesh of the Divine. The Incarnation, God taking human flesh in Christ, also redeems the mortal physical body in devotion. In monasticism, a single-sex community sets its hours by the repeated consecration and evocation of the *latens Deitas*, the hidden God in the Eucharist, which is consumed into one’s own flesh. I suggest that the eucharistic theology of Anglo- and Roman Catholicism reminds the devout of one’s physical body and its relation to others who may be embraced in *communitas*. The importance of the Real Presence in Tractarian theology may be understood as a communion rite among friends, Divine and human.

Dalganrns’ emphasis on friendship is evident in his evaluation of Newman’s place in Oxford and his founding of a monastery:

You can have no conception of what importance Newman is here; he alone can for a moment hold things together. I attribute this less to his wonderful powers of mind than to his wonderful love for all men. He thinks no human misery beneath him, and seems to love persons the better, the wilder and younger they are... His scheme