

BOOKS/LETTERS

Alfred Kinsey's controversial public/private life

Alfred C. Kinsey, A Public/Private Life

Author James H. Jones
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Alfred Kinsey was praised and pilloried in 1948 when his ground-breaking *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* was published. Nearly 50 years later, the Kinsey Institute still attracts scholars and grants — though fewer of both — while critics still impugn his methodology and reject his conclusions.

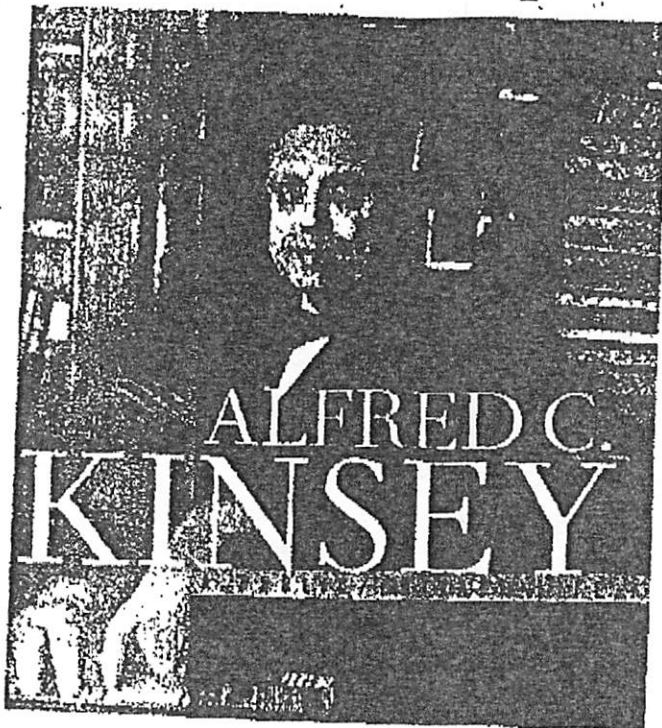
Kinsey was a study in paradox. The product of small-town conservatism and a deeply religious family, he was determined to liberate himself and everyone else from the Victorian mores and morality of his youth. He was a sickly, coddled child who matured into a man whose physical stamina and fierce work ethic astounded those who knew him. He was dominating, abrasive and arrogant and yet uncommonly kind and generous to servants and diligent in locating good positions for his students.

He was an entomologist who became the world authority on the gall wasp and wrote widely used biology textbooks but became noted and notorious for research in human sexuality. He presented himself as a disinterested, dispassionate scientist but was a zealot and a reformer. He layered his writings and lectures with demands for legal and social change. His public image was that of a wholesome family man but he was driven by personal demons that lured him to the extreme and the perverse.

The paradoxes clearly fascinate James H. Jones because they explain much about both Kinsey and

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the age of cultural transition in which he lived. *Alfred C. Kinsey, A Public/Private Life* was 23 years in the making, begun while Jones was a doctoral student at Indiana University. Jones, a former member of the Institute's science advisory board, currently teaches history at the University of Houston and wrote the much acclaimed *Bad Blood*, the story of the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiments.



collections, letters, memoirs, records and official documents.

Kinsey came to Indiana University on Aug. 1, 1920, fresh from Harvard. He was appointed an assistant professor in the Department of Zoology and paid \$2,000 a year. He considered IU a backwater school and was harshly critical of its provincialism and what he considered the moribund administration of then-President William Lowe Bryan. He fully expected to shake the dust of Bloomington in a few years and move on to the Ivy League.

Within a few years, however, he had married, bought a house and begun a family. His biology textbooks, one of which sold a half-million copies, gave him a measure of financial independence and allowed him to pursue extensive field work in entomology. He was accompanied on many field trips by male graduate students. Some later reported that Kinsey spent an inordinate amount of time discussing sex and urging them to relate their sexual experiences. That was the beginning of the case histories that were to occupy Kinsey to the point of obsession for nearly 20 years.

Kinsey's career changed drastically in 1938 with the appointment of Herman B. Wells as IU president. Young, dynamic and progressive, Wells was everything Bryan was not. According to

of sexual behavior and thought. Before long, every student enrolled in the course was expected to complete a sex history.

By this time Kinsey had succumbed to his homosexual tendencies. He was in the midst of an ongoing affair with a male graduate student and confessed to a friend that he was trolling for partners in homosexual hangouts in Chicago. In addition, Jones charges that Kinsey's masochism was well advanced by late adolescence and approached health-threatening proportions in later years. Haunted by his secrets, Kinsey's marriage course lectures "came perilously close to disclosing how much he despised sexual repression in general and society's treatment of homosexuals in particular."

With the help of a cryptographer, Kinsey developed his own system for recording histories that he boasted defied decoding. His emphasis on confidentiality was not universally shared. Criticism of the course reached faculty, many of whom opposed it and resented what they saw as Kinsey's manipulation of Wells. After the first year, several members resigned from the course's instructional staff and Kinsey was accused of exploiting students for his own purposes.

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backers. He approved and assisted the establishment of the Kinsey Institute both as a way of protecting the university and allowing Kinsey greater freedom. Before long, the Institute was a going concern, funded with private contributions and grants from IU and the National Research Council. The NRC was the conduit for financing from the Rockefeller Foundation, a connection that Kinsey prized and viewed as a kind of open sesame to national acceptance and respect. He was devastated in later years when the Rockefeller support was withdrawn.

The rest is history

With accommodations in place on campus and a staff hired, Kinsey set about institute business. The rest is history for the telling by such as Jones. Before he died, Kinsey had compiled 18,000 sexual histories, written two landmark books on human sexuality, accumulated the world's largest collection of pornography and eroticism, and for better and worse influenced public opinions and attitudes about sex.

Jones' most telling criticism is that Kinsey's continued fascination and engagement with the deviant and the perverse clouded his judgment and distorted his results.

As he grew older, Kinsey took
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and often shocking portrait of the man credited with making sex a subject of popular discourse and debate and with charting the direction of modern sex education. It contains a wealth of detail, some of which only a serious student will appreciate. With 773 pages of text and an additional 164 pages of notes and index, it will undoubtedly become the definitive study of Kinsey and his influence on science and his times.

Jones had access to the long-closed archives of the Kinsey Institute, to associates and former staff, IU faculty, Rockefeller Foundation officers, members of various sexual subcultures, scientists and state and national figures. Where personal interviews were impossible, Jones relied on library

vance his private war against traditional morality." He developed a new course on marriage and family and was appointed head. Trustees approved but stipulated that no publicity be given the course.

The prohibition was bound to be violated. Word got around about the candid nature of the project, and hundreds of students signed up. Kinsey assembled specialists to conduct some of the classes but saved the clinical discussions for himself. He was determined both to preach his own gospel of sexuality and to use the course as a laboratory to gain new data on behavior.

Kinsey held confidential conferences with students who wished to ask personal questions or discuss problems. They were encouraged to provide a detailed history

his lectures, they would overthrow the administration of the university. That was not the only caution Kinsey received regarding Hoosier lawmakers. Later, Wells would urge publishers not to release Kinsey's books while the legislature was in session.

Rice, several members of the IU School of Medicine and numerous clergy urged Wells to remove Kinsey from the marriage course. Initially Wells stood firm, considering the dispute a matter of academic freedom. But growing opposition impelled him to propose that Kinsey either give up the course or stop interviewing students. Having already ranged far outside the campus, Kinsey chose to keep interviewing.

Wells continued to be one of Kinsey's stoutest defenders and

adult-child sex is not unnatural and often healthful for the child. He encouraged free, uninhibited sexual activity within his circle of close friends and associates and even filmed many such activities in a studio he set up in his attic.

Kinsey was warned early in his career to moderate his views and actions or face the wrath of the legislature. One can imagine how Hoosier lawmakers of the mid-1950s would have reacted had they known what was going on in that Bloomington attic.

Acknowledge to a Star editorial writer.