

# Rebel With a Cause

*A fresh look at the man whose studies started the sex revolution.*

## SEX THE MEASURE OF ALL THINGS

*A Life of Alfred C. Kinsey.*  
By Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy.  
Illustrated. 513 pp. Bloomington:  
Indiana University Press. \$39.95.

By Rachel P. Maines

**A**LFRED C. KINSEY would probably be flattered if he knew what a controversial figure he still is nearly half a century after his death. Or perhaps he would just be frustrated and annoyed that he still doesn't have his own listing in the Dictionary of Scientific Biography. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy's "Sex the Measure of All Things" is the second major biography of Indiana's most notorious biologist to appear in three years. James Jones's dense and highly critical "Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life" appeared in 1997, arguing that Kinsey's homosexuality and sado-masochistic bent so distorted his motivations and methodology that neither his data nor his conclusions can be trusted. Gathorne-Hardy's account, on the other hand, is unabashedly admiring, a sympathetic, insightful and highly readable story.

Kinsey is a live issue again for a lot of reasons. For conservatives, he's a handy scapegoat for all the changes in sexual mores since World War II, and particularly for the so-called sexual revolution, thought to have started just a few years after his death in 1956. Kinsey, as Gathorne-Hardy notes, is a perfect *post hoc* target.

For the scientific community, he's the guy who began investigating sexual behaviors before they became as risky as AIDS was to make them in our day, and who provided a base line for determining whether or not those behaviors were changing over time. For gays, Kinsey was one of the first American scientists to argue that homosexuality was just another element in a broad spectrum of normal human variation. And for women he was the first person in the 20th century with unassailable scientific credentials to get up and say that only a minority of women reach orgasm in coitus unaided by direct stimulation of the clitoris. Kinsey was so adamant about this that he likened the belief in consistent female orgasm through penetration alone to a conviction that the earth was flat.

In his own time, Kinsey's research on women was so controversial that just about any excuse to dismiss his conclusions would do. His funding source, the Rockefeller Foundation, which had supported him bravely enough through the media blitz associated with "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" (1948), yielded to public pressure and cut off support for a messenger who was soon to bring bad news about supposedly pure and virtuous American womanhood. Many condemned "Sexual Behavior in the Human Female" when it appeared in 1953 without bothering to read it.

There were, of course, some real grounds for criticism of Kinsey's two volumes on sexuality, most of which are elaborated at great length in Jones's biography, and mentioned more briefly by Gathorne-Hardy. His data were vulnerable to the charge of selection bias. Some, in-

cluding Jones, have said that Kinsey's methodology, combined with his desire to confirm his favorite hypotheses, skewed his results beyond redemption. Gathorne-Hardy cogently argues that there is no real support for this allegation; after removal of the suspect data in the 1970's, no major hypothesis required revision by Kinsey's successors.

Furthermore, it is very difficult to imagine what kind of sexual information could possibly be elicited from a random sample even now, let alone in the period 1930-53, given the tendency of randomly sampled populations to refuse to answer personal questions. The fact that Kinsey was able to gather information from 18,000 individuals in less than three decades suggests that he was an extraordinarily persuasive interviewer. He himself did not regard his "reservoir" of statistics as anything like adequate, especially compared with his earlier data on gall wasps, collected from several million specimens.

Another source of controversy in Kinsey's lifetime was his overt contempt for Freud, whose tiny sample sizes and "philosophical" approach (a term of opprobrium in the vocabulary of a passionate empiricist) made him look like very small potatoes as a scientist in Kinsey's eyes. Freud was and is something of a cult figure to many, who were offended by Kinsey's disrespect for their great man.

The Jones biography portrayed Kinsey as a man driven by "demons" of guilt about his personal sexuality to interpret his data in ways that justified and exonerated his own behavior. It is difficult to see how anyone with this kind of motivation could have persuaded 18,000 people to tell him and his colleagues the most intimate secrets of their lives. I find Gathorne-Hardy's hypothesis much more congenial: that Kinsey was a man who had in youth suffered considerably from the repressive social and sexual climate of the time, and who did not want to see such suffering continue.

Gathorne-Hardy, whose previous books include "The Rise and Fall of the British Nanny," shows us a very human and fallible but ultimately likable Kinsey, impatient and irritable at times, stubborn, willful, certainly a monomaniac about his research interests, whether gall wasps or human sexuality. He was also a man who loved gardening, rug making, music, cooking and saving money. To cut costs, he made his staff walk to hotels from train stations, lugging their suitcases — until they persuaded him that they were wasting valuable working time by walking. His wife, Clara, seems to have loved and accepted him right through his obsessions with research and adventures in bisexuality, although she also seems, understandably, to have resented his literally working himself to death after his doctors told him to slow down.

American readers will be amused by some of Gathorne-Hardy's own (often British) quirks: The weather in the United States, especially that of Indiana, is described as "ferocious" and "ghastly." Non-Anglican Protestant denominations are, in the English manner, called "nonconforming," and Gathorne-Hardy reacts with amazement to the Christian right, observing that "America is at once the most licentious culture since Rome and the most puritan country in the world."

Of Gathorne-Hardy's and Jones's revelations about the eccentricities and contradictions in Kinsey's life and work, there was only one that shook me to the soles of my shoes. Alfred C. Kinsey, it turns out, was a Republican. ■

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## The New York Times Book Review

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