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Commentary

By Epstein, Joseph

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Magazine: Commentary, January 1998

THE SECRET LIFE OF ALFRED KINSEY

FAME, LIKE sex, is all too brief--a proposition I recently kitchen-tested by asking a classroom of 25 intelligent undergraduates if they had ever heard the name of Alfred C. Kinsey. Only one had, and he was not exactly sure what it stood for. What it stood for, of course, was sex, neither pure nor simple.

Nearly 50 years ago, Kinsey's name was both a red and a white flag, a household word, an attention-getting device. With the publication in 1948 of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, a book brought out by a scientific publisher that sold an astonishing 200,000 copies in hardcover in its first two months in print, Kinsey was declared (depending upon one's point of view) a hero of the modern day or the greatest underminer of traditional morality the world had ever known. His name was everywhere, from popular songs to church sermons, from limericks to newspaper editorials. He was on the cover of *Time*, profiled in *Life*, the subject of *New Yorker* cartoons. By his admirers his book was thought to be in the same class as *Principia Mathematica*, *The Wealth of Nations*, or *Kapital*; its author was often compared to Galileo, Copernicus, and Freud, scientists who similarly had struggled against an obtuse and belligerent public to bring the truth to light.

The particular truth brought to light by Kinsey's book had to do with the wide discrepancy between official--which is to say, standard, middle-class--accounts of sexual behavior and what was actually going on in the sexual lives of American men. Resting his conclusions on a vast number of interviews, Kinsey was able to show that 90 percent of American men masturbated, 85 percent had had premarital intercourse, between 35 and 45 percent had had extramarital intercourse, 59 percent had engaged in mouth-genital contact, roughly 70 percent had had dealings with prostitutes, 37 percent had had at least a single homosexual encounter that ended in orgasm, and no fewer than 17 percent of farm boys had experienced bestiality.

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Or so the "Kinsey Report," as Kinsey's book came to be called, reported--scientifically.

"THERE ARE a good many fields of investigation, particularly in the social sciences, where in fact if you say anything at all it will not be scientifically justified," Chester I. Barnard, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, wrote in 1951. "And yet in all the affairs of life this kind of investigation seems to be necessary, and I don't think it can be avoided." The subject of Barnard's comment was Alfred Kinsey's work at the Institute for Sex Research at the University of Indiana, which the foundation had been indirectly supporting for many years. Given its potential for controversy, the Kinsey connection was quite worrisome, all the more so because Kinsey, a brilliant man at public relations, had cunningly attached the prestige of the foundation to his own work.

Barnard was on to something, but, truth to tell--and now all of it has been told, in detail, in a massive biography of Kinsey by James T. Jones(*)--he was not aware of a tenth of it. Jones's biography may not be, in a cant phrase of our day, a page-turner, but it certainly is, in the cant phrase of another day, an eye-opener. His lengthy portrait of Kinsey, marked by its own deep earnestness, reveals a man whom perhaps only his family and a few friends and assistants really knew.

"The man I came to know," Jones writes in his preface, "bore no resemblance to the canonical Kinsey." Instead of a cool scientist, Jones discovered a man of missionary zeal, "a crypto-reformer who spent his every waking hour attempting to change the sexual mores . . . of the United States" and who was perfectly willing to bend the canons of science to that purpose. More: while traveling under the flag of a disinterested researcher, Kinsey himself led a secret life as a voyeur, an exhibitionist, a homosexual, and a masochist. "I do not have the impression," wrote Alan Gregg, head of the Rockefeller Foundation's medical division, "that Kinsey or any of his associates have any morbid or pathological preoccupation with any particular aspect of I sex." Dr. Gregg could not have been more wrong. In Jones's succinct words, "The beauty of sex research [was] that it allowed Kinsey to transform his voyeurism into science."

Social science is vulnerable to an examination of the lives of its investigators in a way that pure science is not. Newton's religiosity in no way invalidates the theory of gravity, nor does Einstein's rather soft liberalism vitiate the theory of relativity. But in the social sciences, "every idea," as Metzsche somewhere says, "has its autobiography," and that autobiography can sometimes disqualify the ideas themselves. Although today Kinsey's predilections might help get a man a tenure-track job at an Ivy League university, in the 1940's and early 1950's, the years of his connection with Rockefeller, open knowledge of them would have been sufficient to detonate the Institute for Sex Research, the University of Indiana, and the Rockefeller Foundation in one compact hydrogen bomb of scandal.

ALFRED KINSEY was a man of more than ordinary contradictions. What we would nowadays call a "control freak," he had a strong need to oversee every aspect of his life and work and to dominate everyone around him. Yet he also took insane personal and professional chances in life, and his daily existence was marked as much by compulsion as by rationality. He voted Republican, yet was contemptuous of the middle class; he was in many ways conventional, yet also a genuine revolutionary, a moralist who in all matters relating to sex was very close to amoral; he was a devoted husband and father of three whose own deepest sensual pleasures were homosexual.

Where all this came from is the subject of James Jones's book. We learn from him that even as a child--he was born in 1894 Kinsey despised his father, a pompous, selfish, puritanical man who held a subsidiary teaching job at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. His mother tended to be of no help: a submissive woman who was overprotective of Alfred and her younger son and daughter, she served mainly to reinforce her husband's many little tyrannies. The Kinsey family was religious (Methodist), struggled to appear middle-class, and was apparently quite without joy. In later life, though Kinsey kept up some small contact with the other members of his family, he would refuse to see his father.

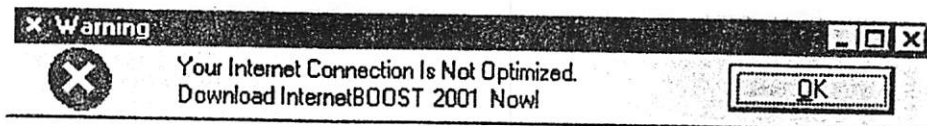
When Alfred was ten, the family moved to South Orange, a prosperous bedroom suburb of Newark and New York. There, according to Jones, Kinsey caught fire; making "the schoolroom his arena of achievement," he graduated as high-school valedictorian, while also becoming interested in classical music and scouting. No athlete, he was by temperament a collector: of stamps, butterflies, bugs. As for sex, his father held him in close rein; Alfred was not allowed to go to movies or dances, and he had no real contact with girls outside the classroom.

Masturbation was said in those days and in those quarters to cause everything from madness to blindness to the mysterious growth of hair. Kinsey's biographer tells us that he went in for it in a prodigious, and exceptionally guilty, way. Given who his father was, his religious upbringing, and his habit of self-criticism, Kinsey, Jones speculates, must have felt the guilt much more acutely than most boys--so much so that to the practice of solitary sexual release he came to add a rather complex form of masochism, one expression of which was his habit of inserting objects in his urethra while masturbating. "In secret," Jones writes, "Kinsey found pleasure through pain."

After high school, Kinsey made it known that he wished to study biology, but his father insisted on a more strictly vocational training in mechanical engineering. After two mediocre years at Stevens, and very much against the wishes of his father--who later disowned him--Kinsey transferred to Bowdoin College in Maine. There he became a fraternity man and a leading figure in the debating club, and changed his religion from Methodist to Congregationalist. But his real conversion was to the divinity of science. As a son of the Progressive era, Kinsey, Jones writes, came to believe there were endless possibilities for improving the lot of men and women. Politics and religion were one means to this end; science, in his view, was another and much more efficient one.

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Kinsey did his graduate work at Harvard, then a center for the "new biology," which aimed at rivaling the physical sciences in their power of formulating laws. He decided to specialize in taxonomy--a decision, Jones says, that "shaped his professional career"--and fell under the sway of one William Morton Wheeler, a high-rolling scientific operator in whom he also found a surrogate father. It was Wheeler who confirmed him in his ardor for the scientific method, helped land him an important post-doctoral traveling fellowship, and, subsequently, obtained a job for him in the department of zoology at Indiana University.

When Kinsey took up his job in Bloomington in 1920, he was twenty-six and still a virgin. There he met his future wife, Clara, an undergraduate chemistry major, and within two months he proposed. Jones reports that the Kinseys were unable to consummate their marriage on their honeymoon and for some while thereafter, owing to a physiological jiggeroo in Clara that was later surgically corrected. In the end they would have four children, one of whom died before the age of four, and they seem to have had a genuine love for each other, if, to put it most gently, a less than ordinary sex life. Clara was herself quite a piece of work.

Prurience time: Kinsey, his biographer informs us, would in later years come to think of his Institute as a sexual utopia of sorts, in which no one would be "bound by arbitrary and antiquated sexual taboos," and he often used the attic of his home to stage little illustrative tableaux. The novelist Glenway Wescott, who used to visit the Kinseys in Bloomington, once confided to Kinsey that his own orgasms were so intense as to cause his body to jackknife at the moment of climax. Kinsey asked permission to film this event, and Wescott readily agreed, running a course on camera with his lover, Monroe Wheeler (director of publications and exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York). After the jackknife had been duly captured on film, "Clara popped into the room with a tray of refreshments, along with clean towels so they could freshen up." Paul Gebhard, Kinsey's successor at the Institute, reported that at the conclusion of still other filming sessions, Clara, the perfect hostess, "would suddenly appear, literally with persimmon pudding or milk and cookies or something." Has social science ever seemed so, well, social?

IN HIS early days at Indiana University, Kinsey was considered a good but not a popular teacher. He was strongly opinionated, not particularly collegial, impatient with dull students. Like all monomaniacs, he was essentially humorless. He took his greatest pleasure in scholarship, which in his case meant studies of the gall wasp, the subject of his award-winning dissertation at Harvard. He was relentless in his pursuit of these insects, for through them he hoped to transform taxonomy, as Jones puts it, "from a descriptive discipline into a science with a strong explanatory power." This, of course, would later become his mission with regard to human sexuality.

Having shed religion, Kinsey by now had also shed conventional views about sex and marriage. He encouraged nudism on field trips with young male graduate students, and later sent pornography to them. Like anyone beyond a certain age who is preoccupied with sex, he became a creep; the wife of one former student described him as "a dirty old man." Kinsey, Jones writes, "could be manipulative and aggressive, a man who abused his professional authority and betrayed his trust as a teacher." He also ran a serious risk of exposure, which could have put paid to his career.

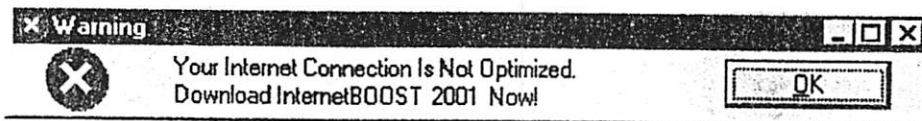
Kinsey's interest in teaching revived when, in 1938, he organized and began to provide the pivotal lectures in a course on marriage and the family. He had been reading the sexologists of the day--Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and the rest--and was singularly unimpressed. "You know," he told a colleague, "there isn't much science here." If the sexologists disappointed, neither did he put any trust in physicians, and he certainly had little use for Freud or psychiatry, whose mission he took to be the reinforcement of the social and sexual status quo. Besides, by now Kinsey had developed his own ideas about sex. He had come to believe that Christianity, with its denial of sexual naturalness, was responsible for "the breakdown of the modern family," and he thought "the great distortions" of the day were "the cultural perversions of celibacy, delayed marriage, and asceticism."

Clearly, Kinsey had found his true subject--in fact, his life's work. Through his teaching and research on human sexuality, he could simultaneously do science, proselytize, and, with luck, bring comfort to people like himself who had suffered under the old regime of sexual reticence and repression. In connection with his course, Kinsey began to counsel students, and from these sessions to amass data on their sexual lives. He found he had an extraordinary knack for eliciting secret information, and soon was asking everyone who took his marriage-and-family course, and eventually others in the university as well, to fill in a lengthy sexual questionnaire. Most--in the name of science--agreed.

In his earliest researches Kinsey did not set out to interview homosexuals as homosexuals, but by the summer of 1939, when he took himself on a field trip to Chicago, he was telling the men he interviewed in the city's gay subculture that he was out to change social attitudes. He developed a taste for men on the margins of society, conducting interviews with male prostitutes, prisoners, and other odd and sometimes unsavory characters. He frequently corresponded with the men whose sexual histories he had recorded, letting them know that, though much of society might view them as deviant, he certainly did not. "Indeed," writes Jones, "anyone who did not know better would have thought Kinsey was socializing, not researching."

"In truth," Jones immediately adds, "Kinsey was socializing." He was also cruising. He spent a lot of time in gay bars in Chicago, where his assignations tended to be of the quick-hit variety. Closer to home, one of the first young men he hired fulltime was a student named Clyde Martin, with whom he was in love. Even as he was pursuing Martin, he asked the young man to attend to Clara Kinsey's sexual needs, which Martin obligingly did. (He was not Clara's only extramarital lover.) Here again Kinsey was taking a big chance; in later years, aware of the importance of appearances, he would become more cautious, hiring as interviewers only married men with children, and eschewing anyone whose wife might have a drinking problem or who had an interest in left-wing causes.

For a long while, Kinsey financed much of his sex research out of his own pocket. But once his Institute was in place, and his Rockefeller connection established, he went to work in full earnest. He began to collect every kind of pornography he could find, depositing it in the Institute library. Booksellers began to put aside erotica for him; others sent things in the mail, which caused problems with U.S. Customs and the post office. And he became increasingly attracted to men with wild or twisted sex lives: masochists, sadists, pedophiles, sexual overachievers of any stripe. Normality, in regard to sex, was not a notion Kinsey recognized.



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Prurience time again: one of Kinsey's discoveries was a sixty-three-year-old man whose history it took seventeen hours to record and who was a fulltime, polynorphously-perverse sex machine. "Mr. X" had had sex from the earliest possible age, and had kept files on his vast exploits. Among his claims was that from, so to speak, a dead start he could achieve ejaculation in ten seconds, and he proved this before Kinsey and his assistant, Wardell Pomeroy. So riveted was Kinsey by this man that he used his experiences in a chapter in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* on "Early Sexual Growth and Activity," conveniently overlooking the fact that Mr. X was also a predatory pedophile who, to quote Jones, "masturbated infants, penetrated children, and performed a variety of other sexual acts on pre-adolescent boys and girls alike." But then, as Jones also remarks, Kinsey, "in his eagerness to combat prudery and to celebrate Eros," was finding it "increasingly difficult to maintain moral boundaries."

WHEN FAME came in 1948 with the appearance of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, it was in part the result of careful orchestration. Kinsey put all his controlling impulses to work on the book's publication. He invited journalists to Bloomington for special briefings, and wherever possible lined up friendly reviews in both the scientific and the popular press. The book swept all boards, intellectually, socially, commercially. It was written and talked about--and purchased--at a rate akin to *Gone With the Wind*. And its effect was electric. Thanks to Kinsey, as the *New Yorker* writer Janet Flanner would put it some years later, "that powerful little crotched corner of the body, which religion, the Christian religion at least, had so long tried to keep covered up and quieted down, has suddenly swollen to a clitoris or penis the size of a mountain from whose height the view is extended all over the Western world."

Still, international celebrity though he was, Kinsey could not control everything, and attacks, too, came rolling in. His use of statistics fell under fire; so did his sampling and interviewing techniques. He was accused of being a crude empiricist, a blatant behaviorist, a coarse scientific reductionist. Critics claimed he was ignorant of the complexities of culture, or that in neglecting the crucial element of love he had disqualified himself from speaking about sex. Finally he was assailed, in his biographer's summing-up, as "a crypto-reformer who promoted permissiveness under the guise of science."

These criticisms--by psychiatrists, anthropologists (Margaret Mead remarked that Kinsey's book "suggests no way of choosing between a woman and a sheep"), literary critics (notably Lionel Trilling), and theologians (Reinhold Niebuhr attacked him twice)--did not shake Kinsey. But they did shake the officers and trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation, who took steps to withdraw their support from Kinsey's Institute for Sex Research. This got to him, and he never quite regained his confidence. His second book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), made nothing like the splash of his first, nor did it sell nearly so well. He was beset with financial worries, and those close to him said he was on

the edge of a nervous breakdown. He died in 1956, at the age of 62, believing himself a martyr to science.

"WE WILL prove to these social scientists," Kinsey told a colleague early in his researches, "that a biological background can help in interpreting social phenomena." As a number of critics pointed out at the time, and as James T. Jones's biography now makes definitively clear, Kinsey's "interpretations" rested less on the findings of biology, or on science of any kind, than on his own social-sexual agenda. Rather than following where scientific methodology led, he simply reversed the process. He set out to prove, for example, that homosexuality was a good deal more common than anyone thought. Havelock Ellis had already declared that homosexuality was not a pathology but a statistical abnormality. Kinsey now undertook to show that it was not even a statistical abnormality. This he did by gathering a radically skewed sample, from which he then proceeded to extrapolate wildly and "interpret" freely.

As one who "loathed Victorian morality," Jones writes, Kinsey was "determined to use science to strip human sexuality of its guilt and repression." But even this was not enough. His real aim, according to his biographer, was to smash all accepted definitions of "normal" and "abnormal" in matters sexual, and thus to clear the field for a new dispensation. Jones is very frank about the nature of this new "moral calculus." As, in Kinsey's view, men were inherently more interested in sex than were women, and, among men, none seemed so interested as homosexuals, he came to believe that the key to sexual utopia lay in the "homoerotic model."

Alfred Kinsey was a moral revolutionary in scientist's clothing. The science was bad, even bogus; the man himself may now be forgotten; but the revolution came to stay, with a vengeance. Kinsey's message--fornicate early, fornicate often, fornicate in every possible way--became the mantra of a sexridden age, our age, now desperate for a reformation of its own.

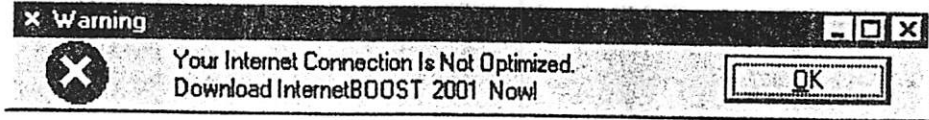
At one point in this biography, Jones relates how Kinsey, in a black mood because the Rockefeller Foundation might not renew his grant, tied a rope around his scrotum, flipped the rope over a pipe, climbed onto a chair with the loose end in his hand, and jumped off, suspending himself in midair, no one knows for how long. There, hoist by Kinsey's petard, hang we all still.

(*) Norton, 937 pp., \$39.95.

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By Joseph Epstein

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