

# BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS

## What the Doctor Saw

TERRY TEACHOUT

TENNESSEE Williams, self-taught, does it; Kinsey with a deafening report does it; "Let's do it, let's fall in love," Noël Coward suggested in an updated set of lyrics he wrote for Cole Porter's classic song, confident that his listeners would get the point. It was a safe bet. No scientific treatise since *The Origin of Species* has been more widely read, widely discussed, widely criticized, or widely remembered than Alfred C. Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Forty-nine years after its publication, the book universally known as the Kinsey Report continues to influence American thinking on sex, even though its major findings have been disproved or significantly modified by later studies; whenever you encounter the oft-repeated claim that one in ten Americans is homosexual, you are hearing a distant echo of Kinsey's original research.

*Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life*, by James H. Jones (Norton, 937 pp., \$39.95)

Among the most striking things about the Kinsey Report was the speed with which the public at large accepted its conclusions. To be sure, Kinsey was subjected to withering criticism—and not just by tent-show evangelists and Republican congressmen, either. Statisticians were appalled by his homemade methodology; intellectuals were no less appalled by his crudely reductive view of human nature. But most people merely gulped and took Kinsey's word for it when he assured them that "at least 85 per cent of the younger male population could be convicted as sex offenders if law-enforcement officials were as efficient as most people expect them to be." He was, after all, a scientist. Why would he lie about such things? Innumerable scholars of repute were just as naïve about Kinsey's motives,

Mr. Teachout, the music critic of *Commentary*, is writing a biography of H. L. Mencken.

and for the same reason: they assumed that scientists were by definition disinterested seekers of truth, who through their best efforts would help turn America into a clean, well-lighted place.

It helped, of course, that Kinsey himself seemed so utterly normal. An Eagle Scout and a fraternity man, he lived in



Bloomington, Indiana, had a wife and three children, and looked like the family doctor in a Norman Rockwell painting. When famous visitors came to his home for dinner, Mrs. Kinsey served

them persimmon pudding for dessert. The effect was charming—and lulling. "I do not have the impression," one bemused visitor wrote in his diary, "that [Kinsey] or any of his associates have any morbid or pathological preoccupation with any particular aspect of sex."

The diarist in question was Alan Gregg, director of the medical division of the Rockefeller Foundation, who was so impressed by Kinsey that he persuaded the foundation to pump tens of thousands of dollars into the Institute for Sex Research, thus making possible the writing of the first Kinsey Report and its 1953 sequel, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. To the end of his life, Gregg believed Kinsey to be a man of absolute rectitude whose sole purpose in life was to expand the horizons of scientific knowledge. Presumably it never occurred to him that one of the many things for which the Rockefeller Foundation was unwittingly picking up the tab was the making of movies in which Kinsey personally demonstrated for posterity his preferred methods of masturbation, and his wife was shown having intercourse with one of the co-authors of the Kinsey Report.

Such gamy revelations make it somewhat easier to slog through the nine-hundred-plus pages of James H. Jones's *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life*, a book which is otherwise as heavy-handed as its clunky subtitle. Mr. Jones, a history professor at the University of Houston, has been studying Kinsey for a quarter-century—he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Institute for Sex Research—and like most academic biographers, he feels compelled to tell absolutely everything he knows, resulting in a bloated tome that would have benefited immeasurably from ruthless pruning. Nevertheless, Mr. Jones deserves full credit for having dug up the sordid truth about Alfred Kinsey, and though he continues to regard his subject as a basically admirable man, readers of his book are likely to come to a very different conclusion indeed.

The truth about Kinsey is that he was no impersonal gatherer of scientific data, but "a genuine revolutionary, a man who intended to use science to attack Victorian morality and to promote an ethic of tolerance." Moreover, he had a

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personal stake in seeking to overturn traditional morality, for he was also a bisexual voyeur who engaged from adolescence onward in increasingly violent masochistic masturbation, the specifics of which are described by Mr. Jones with sickening exactitude. Not only did Kinsey practice what he preached, he expected his colleagues to do the same: wife- and husband-swapping was virtually compulsory among the upper-level staffers of the Institute for Sex Research (at least two of whom had sex with both Kinsey and his wife), and their diverse couplings and singlings were regularly filmed in the attic of the Kinsey home, all in the sacred name of science.

Kinsey blamed his sexual peculiarities on his religious upbringing—his father was an old-school Methodist—and once he obtained his doctorate in science from Harvard in 1919, he burned ever after with the hard, gem-like flame of a convert to atheism zealously determined to reform society along rational lines. Appropriately enough, he started out as a taxonomic entomologist specializing in evolutionary patterns of the gall wasp, but soon realized that in order to achieve his goal of becoming “a second Darwin,” he would require a wider field of fire.

In 1938, Kinsey began teaching a course in sex education at Indiana University, in the process collecting from his students the first of the 18,000 sex histories that ultimately formed the backbone of the two Kinsey Reports. By the time of his death in 1956, he had personally interviewed 7,985 Americans (among them his wife and children) about their sexual behavior, asking each of them hundreds of questions covering everything from age and occupation to frequency of sexual contact with animals. Unversed in modern statistical methods, Kinsey chose his subjects not at random but as opportunities presented themselves, relying on the sheer size of his data base to create a representative sample. But from the outset of his research, he sought out as many male homosexual interviewees as possible, both because little was then known about homosexuality, and in order to discreetly engage in anonymous sexual relations with men in the large cities to which he traveled in search of data.

For this reason—and also because he similarly oversampled prison inmates—Kinsey vastly overestimated the incidence of homosexual behavior among Americans (possibly by more than three

times, according to later surveys based on statistically reliable random samples of large populations). It is impossible to know whether his interviewing practices

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were consciously designed with a hidden agenda of advocacy in mind, but the fact remained that, in Mr. Jones's words, “his methodology and sampling technique virtually guaranteed that he would find what he was looking for.” Nor can there be any question that his books were written in order to persuade readers that all forms of human sexuality, including his own, were equally acceptable:

As a son of the Enlightenment, Kinsey never doubted that knowledge would bring understanding. As he put it in his best fatherly tone, “most human sexual activities would become comprehensible to most individuals, if they could know the background of each other's individual behavior.” In other words, people had only to learn the truth, and understanding and tolerance would follow. Few propositions reveal more fully the values and assumptions of the Progressive Era, whose optimism and naïveté had shaped Kinsey's life so profoundly in youth.

Kinsey's own tolerance of “sexual variation,” as he called it, was so complete as to include pedophilia. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* contains a chapter on “early sexual growth and activity” in which the orgasms of children are described in detail. This chapter, says Mr. Jones, appears to have been based almost entirely on the reminiscences of a man who claimed to have engaged in sexual relations with six hundred pre-adolescent boys and two hundred pre-adolescent girls. When offered the opportunity to acquire the diaries and photographic archives of “Mr. X,” Kinsey jumped at it. “There is nothing

else quite like it and nothing that has been published in the scientific literature,” he wrote to Mr. X in 1944. “Everything that you accumulated must find its way into scientific channels.” His enthusiasm was so warm as to arouse—for once—the moral disapproval of his biographer:

Whatever the putative value to science of Mr. X's experiences, the fact remains that he was a predatory pedophile. Over the course of his long career as a child molester, he masturbated infants, penetrated children, and performed a variety of other sexual acts on pre-adolescent boys and girls alike. Betraying a huge moral blind spot, Kinsey took the records of Mr. X's criminal acts and transformed them into scientific data.

Yet no contemporary reviewer of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* seems to have boggled at Kinsey's suspiciously vivid accounts of pre-adolescent orgasms (in the course of which he blandly remarks that some children “will fight away from the partner and may make violent attempts to avoid climax, although they derive definite pleasure from the situation”). Instead, he was portrayed in the mainstream press as a cool-headed, courageous researcher seeking to enlighten the masses. It was, perhaps surprisingly, the intellectuals who had reservations about Kinsey's count-the-climaxes approach to explaining human sexual behavior. Reinhold Niebuhr testily observed that he had made “the achievement of orgasm . . . the *summum bonum* of his value scheme”; Lionel Trilling noted his “extravagant fear” of “all ideas that do not seem . . . to be, as it were, immediately dictated by simple physical fact.”

But these criticisms went mostly unheard in the predictable clatter of applause for *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, as did the devastating analyses of statisticians who showed that Kinsey's sample was so skewed as to preclude its use as the source of valid generalizations about the sexual practices of Americans as a group. Kindly Dr. Kinsey was telling his anxious patients just what they wanted to hear: sex was good, and the more of it they contrived to have, the better for their mental health. “Perhaps you've ‘broken the ice,’” one woman told him in a fan letter, “and by the time my six-year-old son has found my daughter-in-law, she will have a much happier time of all-around living.”

Perhaps she did, but given the cultural havoc wrought by five decades of sex-

ual liberation, one may take leave to doubt it. Seen in retrospect, Alfred Kinsey looks less like a shining light of modernity than the last of the late Victorians, those science-loving reformers who, stranded by the ebbing of the sea of faith, sought to reshape the world in their own earnest image, instead causing it to collapse upon the heads of their grandchildren. As for Kinsey's

own quest for personal liberation, it ended in pain and squalor: he developed a massive pelvic infection as the result of his masochistic practices, almost certainly hastening his death at the age of 62. Growing up at the turn of the century, he had been exposed to countless tracts warning that masturbation led to insanity and death. In his case, they may have been onto something. □

avant garde we always try to find some other word to describe them.

What Arthur Herman has done in this wide-ranging and powerfully persuasive survey is to show just how permeated with traditional declinism the cultural theorists of the Left are today. This is a matter not just of noting surface similarities, or picking out a few suggestive quotations such as the one from Cornel West given above, but rather of tracing the deep root-systems of their arguments.

Professor Herman has devised, in effect, a genealogy of the jeremiad. Gloomy denunciations of the modern world have an extensive family tree; behind and beyond the eco-warrior inveighing against technology, or the multiculturalist attacking the sterility of white European civilization, there stands an array of intellectual ancestors, including some pretty disreputable ones. Among the granddaddies, cousins, and in-laws of this family one finds, for example, Adolf Hitler and Arthur de Gobineau, the founder of modern racism.

But "racial degeneracy" is just one possible form of declinism, and it is not

## The Descent of Decline

NOEL MALCOLM

THE idea of decline, you may suppose, ain't what it used to be. The words "decadence" and "degeneracy," so commonly invoked by politicians and cultural critics three or more generations ago, are scarcely the key terms of present-day political debate. Grandiose pessimistic theorizing of the sort that gave us Brooks Adams's *The Law of Civilization and Decay* or Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* is out of fashion; the last person to attempt it, Arnold Toynbee, was slowly taken to pieces by other historians and is little read today.

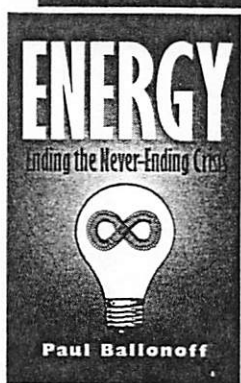
But although theoretical system-building may be outmoded, the mindset of radical declinism, and many of the central claims of the classic theorists of

*The Idea of Decline in Western History*, by Arthur Herman (Free Press, 521 pp., \$30)

decadence, are alive and well. "We live in an age of cultural disarray and social decay, an age filled with ruins and fragments," is one typical remark. It comes not from Spengler, nor from Nietzsche or Carlyle, nor from Count Volney—whose *Les Ruines* (1787) helped set off the fad of romantic pessimism—but from Cornel West's *Race Matters*, published just four years ago. And there are plenty more of such classic-sounding declinist *cris de coeur* to be found in the works of radical multiculturalists and Afrocentrists, not forgetting eco-pessimists such as Albert Gore and his spiritual soulmate, the Unabomber.

The great mistake most of us proba-

bly make about declinism is to assume that it is the natural preserve of the Right. Surely, we say to ourselves, people who go on about decline must be nostalgic conservatives, and probably middle-aged ones at that. As for "degeneracy," we all know that it is a word out of the fascist lexicon; Hitler organized exhibitions, for jeering purposes, of *entartete Kunst* ("degenerate art"), and however wearied or repelled we might be by some of the products of our own



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