

Book Reviews

Review Essay

‘TOO DARN HOT’: A BIOGRAPHY OF KINSEY

Alfred C. Kinsey: a life, second edition. James H. Jones, 2004. New York: Norton; ISBN 0415250404, 303 + xx pp., £11.99, paper.

This is a remarkable book about a remarkable man. It is also a massive book, with over 770 pages of small font and over 110 pages of detailed notes and sources. Jones took well over 20 years in putting it all together, weaving his account from a plethora of academic records and newspaper cuttings and numerous interviews with relatives, ex-colleagues and friends. Between the initial publication in 1997 and this revised edition, some of his sources had died, and so he is able to identify them; Kinsey's widow and one of their daughters co-operated, but his other two children refused to be interviewed. The book took over 20 years in the writing; this may explain why, in some sections, Jones appears to be very warm towards his subject whilst in others he appears to be rather less so.

The story Jones provides is of a man brought up in a strictly evangelical family, with God's wrath being around the corner waiting for any misdemeanour of thought or deed. His childhood was apparently unpleasant, living in a crowded suburb of New York City, having a domineering and ambitious father who 'admonished far better than he nurtured'. Sundays were fiercely protected, with Sunday School and church attendance being compulsory, no music or levity, nor transport, permitted. His father's world was divided into saints and sinners, with many more of the latter than of the former. All of this, coupled with some severe illnesses, led to a great deal of internal reflection and analysis, and sewed the seeds for his later endeavours.

Kinsey, like many (or most) other curious children, engaged in some sexual explorations with some neighbouring children. Whereas, as Jones points out, such voyeuristic play is generally regarded as being harmless and benign, in Kinsey's case the immense confusion caused by these activities in the context of his powerfully religious upbringing led to agonies of guilt and shame that help to account for his later obsessive quest for 'truth', as well as his challenges to societal sexual repression.

Kinsey's secondary school years were marked by devotion to study and extracurricular activities, including music (playing and collecting records), gardening, bird watching, bug collection, a general love of nature and being a model Boy Scout. Close friends were apparently rare. During the crisis of masculinity that marked the US culture at the time (and still does, by

the way), Kinsey found a way to be masculine through exploring nature, hiking and other 'manly' outdoor pursuits. But there was a serious problem.

Both within his family and within society (and within the Boy Scout movement itself), there were strong prohibitions on any form of sexual expression. Masturbation was considered harmful and sinful. The all-male camps allowed a degree of covert exploration of each other's bodies that were not enabled anywhere else and, as Jones reports, '[the boys]... learned to their surprise that they could venture into new territory without being burned to a crisp'. Yet Kinsey, more so than the other boys, felt a degree of self-condemnation from which he could not escape; further, these experiences were accompanied by 'homoerotic fantasies'.

Kinsey's father pushed him towards a college education in engineering, a suitably conventional and masculine career. During this time at college, however, Kinsey's academic performance was not outstanding (in contrast to his earlier successes) and he clearly hankered after the chance to study his favourite subject – biology. Using strength gained from years of being repressed, he eventually told his father of his decision to move to a small liberal arts college with a good biology department. His father responded by withdrawing all financial support from his son, and, from Jones's account, all emotional support as well.

Kinsey went on to excel in his new studies, got heavily involved in the local YMCA as a voluntary pastime, and eventually moved to Harvard. Some of his professors served to replace his 'lost' father, and close attachments were formed. His early years as a researcher were spent in collecting and classifying gall wasps, making frequent and extensive trips to find new varieties (often taking younger researchers with him), and having a driving ambition to collect more than anyone else had done before him.

During this time, Kinsey met and courted Clara, a woman with similar outdoor interests who did 'little to accentuate her femininity'. Their engagement was apparently platonic; at the time this would not have raised any eyebrows, but Jones suggests that this was 'as much to do with sexual conflict as with moral rectitude'. Later, he describes some problems over the consummation of the marriage (it took 'several months') and, even later, describes in some detail the rather unusual sexual arrangements that they came to in order to manage. To the outside world, however, this was a marriage made in heaven.

Kinsey moved to Indiana to teach biology, wrote a successful textbook for students, and completed his rejection of religion; he was committed to an evolutionary stance which, at the time, was not marked by widespread acceptance amongst his colleagues. Jones suggests that these academic leanings and activities were motivated by a strong desire to reject the religious fervour that had surrounded his childhood. He was, by all accounts, an intolerant teacher, expecting the best from students and colleagues,

but a good family man. He wanted to provide for his children an honest and open atmosphere regarding their own sexual development, thereby encouraging their avoidance of the sexual repression that he had suffered from himself. He and Clara became known in the area as the couple who would provide honest answers to 'embarrassing' questions, and were much in demand.

It was traditional in some US universities at the time to run courses in marriage and the family. Kinsey's evolving interests, as well as his determination to liberalize the area of sexuality, led to his volunteering to coordinate the Indiana course. He renamed it sex education, and gathered a group of teachers whom he felt would do justice to his ideals. The course was not uncontroversial, but proved to be popular with students, many of whom were apparently willing to share their own personal concerns and histories with Kinsey. Partly as a result of these revelations, as well as his scientific interest in biology and classification, he developed an overpowering interest in the scientific study of human sexual behaviour. Much of what he read (and heard from his students) shocked him, including the assumed negative results of masturbation and the pathology of homosexuality. As Jones puts it, '[Kinsey] showed how badly he wanted to use science, the greatest weapon he commanded, to attack the conventional morality that had caused him so much pain'.

And so began one of the most ambitious and controversial research endeavours of the century. Extending way beyond the campus, Kinsey became devoted to collecting as many sexual histories as he could, trained his staff to do likewise, and recorded in close detail all that they were told. Wishing to explore areas that others before him had not explored, he ventured into the 'seedier' parts of cities and towns, getting deeply involved in the gay communities and with others whose preferred forms of sexual expression were regarded, at the time, as being beyond the pale. He also targeted sex offenders in an effort to understand what motivated them. Further, surprising as it may seem, the majority of colleagues (including visiting staff from funding agencies) were subject to his detailed interviews and, perhaps more surprisingly, seemed to willingly agree to take part in them. He was, by all accounts, a most persuasive person!

The early research was funded from his own pocket (he had done quite well from the sales of his biology text book), but he knew that he needed much larger sums to fulfil his ambitions of obtaining many thousands of case histories. Support came in the form of Robert Yerkes, one-time president of the American Psychological Association, government advisor on intelligence testing during the first world war, and, according to Jones, also sexually repressed. The initial grant came from the National Research Council, which received some of its funding from the Rockefeller Foundation; the Foundation, however, was reluctant to be too closely

associated with any of the work it sponsored, a situation that developed later into a source of great anguish as Kinsey tried to exploit the association to gain wider acceptance of his work.

Out of these initial beginnings, the Institute of Sex Research developed, based at Indiana University, a research centre that remains active to this present day. Loyal and dedicated staff were appointed, more and more case histories were collected, and detailed analyses were carried out. Eventually, two volumes were published – one on males in 1948 followed by one on females in 1953. These laid out in great detail patterns of sexual activity and many related issues in a form that had never been managed (or even dared) before. They became instant bestsellers, dominated the news for weeks after publication, led to immense controversy, and turned Kinsey into a household name (and the subject of a film released in 2005).

So much for the academic and public face of Kinsey's massive achievements. What Jones provides is much more than just this, and much of this additional insight into the man and his activities is the sort of information that one might rather not have, but which is impossible to ignore. In addition to his apparent fervour to rid the world of sexual repression and to 'normalize' what had hitherto been hidden and highly stigmatized activities (possibly to help him to come to terms with his own predilections), Kinsey led a highly secretive life of sexual exploration.

In addition to his own sexual explorations with colleagues on his many field trips, he also involved his wife Clara. On the surface, they were a happily married and conventional couple with three children; what was not known at the time, however, was that he actively encouraged her to have sex with some of his staff. Further, affairs between other members of his staff were also encouraged, but Kinsey insisted that he be asked permission in advance, and that his word was to be obeyed. That this was going on while he was – to the world – a respectable and objective sex researcher attests not only to the immense loyalty shown by his staff (and by the others who became embroiled in such events), but also to the absence of an invasive and intrusive press. It is just inconceivable that such a double life could be led in the present day.

To a large extent, and ironically, this was Kinsey's major achievement – the exposure of the double lives that the majority of Americans were leading at the time of his work. By exploring the realities of sexual lives, he was able to expose the hypocrisy of the moral climate that insisted on chasteness both before and within marriage, to reveal that hitherto invisible activities – such as masturbation – really did take place, and to reveal that same sex attraction was rather more widespread than had been believed and should not be regarded as being merely pathological. He also opened the door to many subsequent sex surveys, although more recent ones have used rather better sampling techniques than he managed, and

have had a rather more clear-cut justification in the light of the threat of HIV and other STIs.

Whether or not Kinsey did achieve his hope of liberating sexual attitudes and mores is not so clear. Despite the gains made during the 1960s – some say as a result of the liberating effect of hormonal contraception – some pretty severe backward steps have been taken in recent years. Over US\$200 million of federal funding per year is being spent on abstinence-only education in US schools, despite the lack of any research evidence that this approach is in any way successful, and President Bush's US\$15 billion emergency five-year plan for AIDS relief in poorer countries has been heavily criticized for its insistence that a fair proportion of its prevention efforts must be spent on 'abstinence-based education'. Wider contexts, such as poverty and gendered power imbalances, get little mention in the plan.

And part of the moral right's campaign to defend their approach involves attacking the initial Kinsey research as well as the continuing work of the Institute established in his name (now called the Kinsey Institute for Research on Sex, Gender and Reproduction). Its recently retired Director has written a most disturbing article in which he documents the long-running campaign to discredit and demonize Kinsey himself, and to use him 'as a scapegoat for many of society's current problems' (Bancroft, 2004). There have been a series of intensive personal attacks and counter-attacks, actual and threatened lawsuits, the threat of withdrawal of research funding for seemingly purely political reasons, a number of books and articles accusing Kinsey of scientific fraud and child abuse, and rampant expressions of homophobic attitudes.

James Jones's book exposes Kinsey's hidden life as well as his public achievements, and makes it pretty clear that there are some strong links between the two arenas. But, in order to command respect for his public persona-as-scientist, Kinsey had to keep his secret life hidden from view. That he should feel the need to do this whilst exposing the hypocrisy of American culture at the time is indeed ironic. But, equally, by delving so deeply into this private arena, and exposing it so vividly, Jones himself may have fed the opponents of Kinsey and his followers much useful material with which (suitably embellished) to discredit these achievements. Sex remains, and may well do so for many years hence, a challenging topic.

Bancroft, J. 2004: Alfred C. Kinsey and the politics of sex research, *Annual Review of Sex Research* 15, 1–39.

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