
Book Reviews

Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life. By James H. Jones. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. Pp. xx, 937. Illustrations, notes, note on sources, index. \$39.95.)

Forty years ago Alfred Charles Kinsey was a name to conjure with: he either fathered the sexual revolution of the 1960s or he degraded American culture in disgusting ways. Kinsey the entomologist and authority on gall wasps had stressed variation. Kinsey the sexual behavior authority documented sexual heterogeneity. Those who valued their sexual nature applauded him. Those who valued cultural and religious constraints upon sexual activity condemned him. Attacks from the religious and political right have continued into this decade. So too, do celebrations of sexual liberation and variety.

Kinsey died at the age of sixty-two in 1956. The chaos of his personality repelled and attracted as did his legacy in death. Dominating others, mostly subordinates, came naturally for him. Iron-willed and driven, he spent his formative scientific years pursuing every type of North American gall wasp—a tiny, antlike insect. His youth he preferred to forget or recalled with bitterness. A domineering father and weak mother provided adequate excuse for him to leave home and pursue his own education through Bowdoin College and doctoral studies at Harvard. What parenting could not nurture, homosexuality and masochism directed (p. 4).

James H. Jones began this biography as a doctoral candidate at Indiana University. His archival work appears to be exhaustive. The most valuable part of this biography deals with Kinsey's incredible ability to secure foundation and institutional support for what everyone then knew to be explosively controversial research. Sex and politics is a theme as American as apple pie. It has been since the inception of the republic—think of the doggerel about Thomas Jefferson's sex life.

Jones spares no sensibility in his discussion of the intimate details of Kinsey's own sexual appetites. As a result, the book is a depressing read. An upright, intelligent reformer metamorphoses into a harried, haggard sexual caricature. Details of his final infection and death (p. 738 onward) seem ordained by a sadistic dramatist determined to illustrate the wages of sin. Kinsey had since puberty inflicted pain on himself with insertions of objects into his urethra. In the summer of 1954 he stood in his basement offices, placed a rope across an overhead pipe, "tied a strong, tight knot around his scrotum with one end of the rope . . . the other end he wrapped around his hand. Then, he climbed up on a chair and jumped off" (p. 739). He developed an infection and gradually lost his robust physical health.

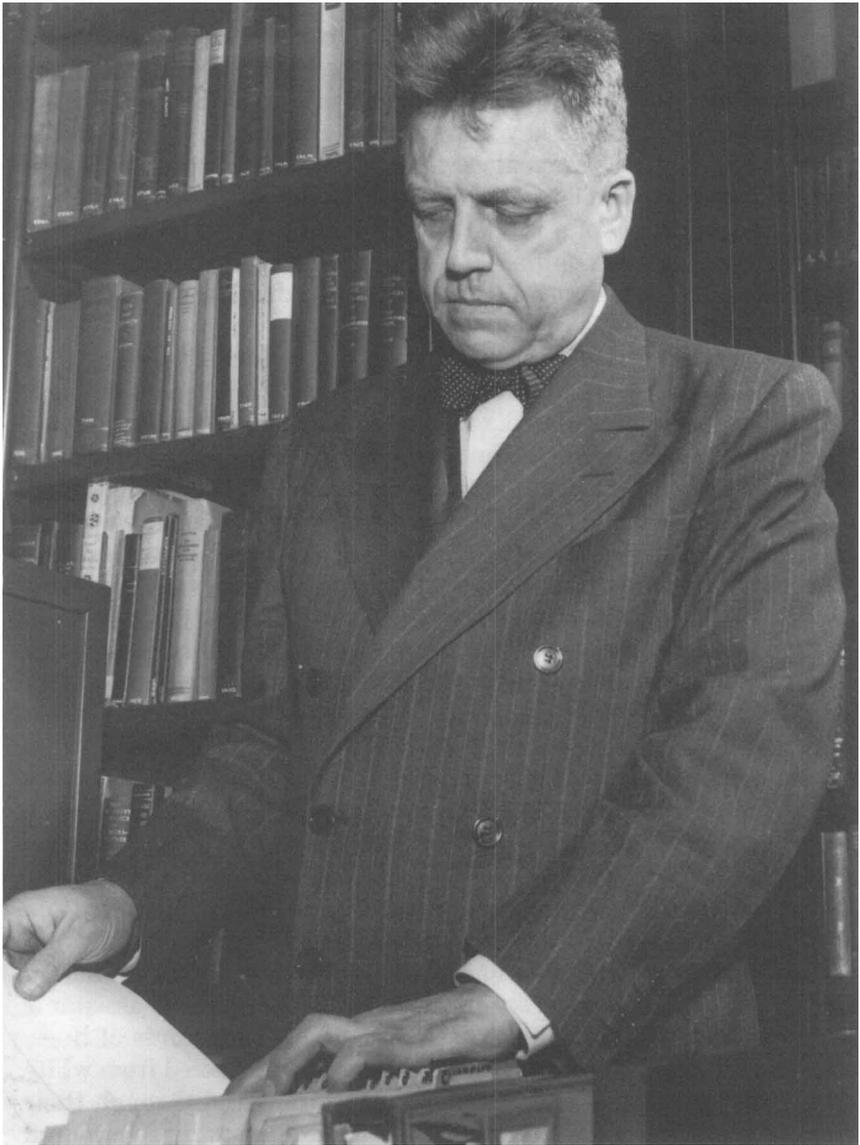
He traveled and worked, but his heart enlarged and fibrillated. He died on the morning on August 25, 1956.

It becomes clear in this biography that Jones can find much to laud in Kinsey, for example, his struggle to overcome bias and hatred in Victorian mores concerning sex. But he comes to deplore the moral deterioration in the man. The biographer's study was influenced by the psychohistorical techniques developed by Erik Erikson. Childhood development is of key importance—the child is father to the man. In Kinsey's case sexual gratification was solitary, painful, and urgent. Marriage and four children later, he remained driven, at odds with society's view of a proper life. Toward the end of life Kinsey could approve of pedophilia. That is too much for his biographer. He appears to believe that a lingering, painful death may have been cruel, but somehow it was just.

What of Indiana University? Was this the sort of "science" that a state institution ought to encourage? Kinsey had been a diligent, if methodologically outdated, zoologist specializing in insects. Retooling him for pioneering work on sexual behavior in humans required some sort of institutional discussion and approval. President Herman B Wells, certainly a skillful and shrewd college leader, was the pivot of this decision. Wells could maneuver successfully with all the constituents: legislature, interest groups, faculty, staff, and students. He backed Kinsey through the late 1930s, and in 1940 foundation money supported Kinsey's research and publication. Funds came from the standing committee of the National Research Council, the Committee for Research in Problems of Sex. The vehicle was a course on marriage, which in turn evolved from Kinsey's courses in biology for home economics majors.

Kinsey organized a course on the family taught by a small group from various disciplines in the university and this sort of thing appealed to the administration. Kinsey also organized and directed the research, and gradually his group acquired a life of its own. The hallmark was an invitation to students, later faculty, friends, family, and anyone else who could contribute, to come for a confidential interview on all aspects of sexual behavior. Kinsey trained assistants and by the time of his death cataloged many thousands of these Gallup Poll-like interviews. Initially they were collected from white men, then blacks, women, prisoners, children, and through their mothers, babies. Each interview could include up to three hundred questions.

In addition Kinsey compiled an immense collection of erotica and in a stunning misuse of what is now termed "human subjects," subjected his graduate students and their wives to a variety of sexual encounters, some of which were filmed. From any perspective, his treatment of some of his colleagues and students was unethical and manipulative. From this book it appears that neither Wells nor any authority in the granting agencies learned of this activity. Enough suspicion existed, however, for a skittish board of the Rockefeller



ALFRED C. KINSEY, c. 1949

Indiana University Archives, Bloomington, Indiana.

Foundation—the major source of funds—to deny support in 1953. The board was helped along the path of decision by a faction in congress led by Joseph R. McCarthy.

When criticism did surface, and especially after the 1948 publication of *The Sexual Behavior of the Human Male*, Wells deflected it by insisting that the “University never approves or disapproves the research findings of its experimental scientists” (p. 714). To the end Wells remained loyal to Kinsey’s program, and when it was attacked by Catholic prelates in 1953, he responded, “Indiana University stands today . . . firmly in support of the scientific research project that has been undertaken and is being carried on by one of its eminent biological scientists, Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey” (p. 713).

These sections of the biography that examine the relationship between ethical issues and institutions are most useful. Generally, institutions strive to avoid having a Kinsey in the fold—nowadays it might be in reproductive biology and genetic engineering—because political, religious, and social issues all raise difficult questions that involve legal and budgetary support. One need only consider problems associated with genetics in post-World War II Germany or reproductive technology in this country today. Educational institutions in those days attempted to offer a moral awareness to their students, but science cloaked some darker agendas. Both national and state institutions backing Kinsey understood the dangers of their support but were willing to undertake it because they recognized the importance of the issues: what is the nature of sexual behavior in society, and what legal limits should be placed on criminal or unsuitable activity?

In the history of this country, society through its elected representatives often says one thing and does another. By the time Kinsey published his second big book, *The Sexual Behavior of the Human Female* (1953), financial support and his own moral fiber had eroded substantially. At the time of his death three years later, the sexual revolution he had long advocated had begun to take shape. Within the next decade the powerful mix of sex, drugs, war, and racial integration changed America profoundly. Alfred Kinsey contributed to that change—it is not yet clear quite how much.

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Larry Conrad of Indiana: A Biography. By Raymond H. Scheele. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, in cooperation with the IUPUI Office of Service Learning and Student Voluntary Service, 1997. Pp. x, 315. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.)

Larry Conrad was a central figure in Indiana Democratic politics in the 1970s, twice winning election as secretary of state and