

BOOK REVIEWS

Catalyst for a Cultural Dialogue

Alfred C. Kinsey. *A Public/Private Life.* JAMES H. JONES. Norton, New York, 1997. xx, 937 pp., + plates. Paper, \$39.95 or C\$49.99. ISBN 0-393-04086-0.

The English poet John Donne died in 1631. There is a portrait of him in old age in his death shroud, features gaunt and cadaverous, eyes shrunken. He is meditating on death, judgment, and his past sins. This portrait contrasts with an earlier one of him as Elizabethan lover, stylishly dressed in black with fine lace at his sleeves and open collar, sly, sensuous, and ironic, fingers long and insinuating. He seems to be thinking not about death, but about love, sex, and poetry. Donne is the author of some of the best erotic and religious poetry in English. It is impossible to know how the tension between the erotic and the religious contributed to his poetic achievement, but we do know that his last years were racked by remorse and fear of eternal damnation, which he felt was due largely to his sinful past.

Donne is not the only major literary figure who tormented himself. Tolstoy made himself and his family miserable because of an unresolvable conflict between his wish to enjoy sexual pleasure and his conviction that such a wish was depraved. A description of Gogol's deathbed repudiation of his homosexual past would make most readers sick at heart. Again, we cannot say whether the work these men produced was made possible by such agonizing conflict or was stunted and maimed by it. Would *Anna Karenina* have been even greater had Tolstoy not struggled against his own sexual nature, or would it never have been written? Would there have been other works we can only guess at? We do, however, glimpse the enormous grief, guilt, and suffering that these men imposed on themselves.

Therapists know that such suffering is not confined to the great and famous. In my own clinical experience, I recall the middle-aged man who blamed his son's Down syndrome on a single marital infidelity; the fundamentalist woman who avoided sexual contact with her husband after he confessed to having masturbated while stationed on a nuclear submarine before they were married; the homosexual Catholic priest who was driving himself crazy with loneliness because he be-

lieved that God wished him to abstain from the sexual activity he craved his whole life. One can deplore the breakdown of morality in the modern world—the disintegration of the family, the trivialization of human intimacy, the loss of tradition—but unless one claims to know for a fact what God or Nature wishes people to do with their lives, one must, I think, applaud relieving the torment that people impose on themselves for not living up to an unrealistic code of sexual behavior.

The shift in sensibility that allowed people to value their own sexual nature was a long and complex social process, but one of its crucial phases was made possible by Alfred Kinsey and his research into the sexual behavior of American men and women. His two major publications, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 and the companion volume about women in 1953, were enormously influential in initiating and informing a debate about what is natural and desirable in sexual behavior. Kinsey claimed to show that, even in a period of great social conformity, American men and women conducted their sexual lives in defiance of traditional norms: Rates of marital infidelity were higher than anyone thought; almost all boys masturbated during adolescence; most women achieved orgasm through clitoral rather than vaginal stimulation; more than one-third of American men had had a homosexual experience in their adult lives; and one out of six men considered themselves more homosexual than heterosexual. These findings shocked and outraged the religious, political, and psychiatric defenders of traditional morality. Others argued that, if this picture of American sexual behavior was even remotely true, then traditional morality was unreasonable, unnatural, and pernicious. Without Kinsey, it is hard to imagine either the women's movement or gay liberation.

The controversy generated by Kinsey's two reports still rages, centering on two issues. The first is whether Kinsey's empirical data really do constitute an argument for the untrammelled expression of sexual drive or are only evidence for the breakdown of a traditional and salubrious moral discipline. The second is the claim that Kinsey's data are inaccurate, misleading, and mendacious. For example, a 1994 study by the University of Chicago that was based on different sam-

pling techniques and ways of eliciting information found that the incidence of male homosexuality was only 2.8 percent, not the 16 to 18 percent that Kinsey reported.

James H. Jones, professor of history at the University of Houston and author of *Bad Blood*, which exposed the racist scandal of the Tuskegee syphilis study, now joins the battle. His very long book attempts to provide an account of Kinsey's life and professional achievement. He claims to have spent more than 25 years researching and writing it, and the story he tells is really quite interesting.

Kinsey was born in 1894 in central New Jersey to an intellectually and socially ambitious father, who imposed his values and religious convictions on his family. The future sex researcher at first conformed to his father's demands, chalking up a drearily impressive record in school, the Boy Scouts, and church and community service. By college, he found that he had other ambitions and talents and broke with his father, leaving to study biology at Bowdoin in Brunswick, Maine, where he supported himself by prodigious efforts. Impressing his teachers with his will and determination, he earned his doctorate at Harvard and began teaching at Indiana University—at that time, something of a cultural and academic backwater—where he became the world's leading expert on the gall wasp. He became an atheist. He married an intelligent, enthusiastic, and supportive woman, who typed his papers, entertained his colleagues, defended him against all criticism, and called him "Prok" (for Professor K.). They had four children.

Kinsey discovered his life's project as a result of a course that he taught about marriage and sexuality, and began a series of elaborate interviews with his students concerning their sexual histories. By the time of his death in 1956, the archives of the institute that he almost single-handedly ran contained records of 18,000 such interviews, of which Kinsey himself had conducted 8000. These interviews formed the basis of his two famous reports. He also amassed a vast collection of anthropological and sociological material on sex. By the sheer expenditure of energy and the profound social effect of his work, Kinsey surely rates an honorable place in the history of American social thought.

But Jones has another story to tell—an account of Kinsey's private sexual life. According to Jones, Kinsey from adolescence fought a losing battle to control his secret homosexuality and masochism. His extramarital sexual life ranged from mildly distasteful bunkhouse antics on field trips to gather gall wasps, through clandestine forays to homosexual centers of large cities, to self-torture—involving inserting objects up his urethra, self-circumcision without anesthe-

sia, and suspending himself by his scrotum from the ceiling. All this, it appears, transpired with the knowledge of his wife, with whom he continued to maintain sexual relations, and that of his closest colleagues. No hint of personal scandal ever emerged, despite vindictive investigations by the FBI and other concerned individuals.

The first question to ask is, Why should any of this interest us? Jones' answer is that it provided the motivation for Kinsey's work, informed his procedures, and distorted and slanted his results. According to Jones, Kinsey was driven to such prodigious feats of research both by his wish to overthrow the traditional morality of his domineering father and to justify his own sexual compulsions by showing that all people harbor similar perverted desires. By adducing such a motivation, Jones intends to provide a critique. Implicit in this viewpoint is a notion that the social scientist, like the historian, should pursue his or her research free of personal bias or tendentiousness. Such a view is naïve and dangerous because it allows researchers to ignore their own biases.

Jones has plenty of them himself, although it is sometimes difficult to know exactly what he is saying because of his cliché writing. First, he seems, at times, to loathe Kinsey as a man and lets few of Kinsey's quirks and opinions—from gardening and classical music to atheism—pass without psychologizing them away. He sees almost all of Kinsey's work as a driven attempt to control others, to indulge his voyeuristic urges, to butch up his unsteady masculine persona, and to justify his sexual drives. Second, a pervasive intellectual conservatism runs throughout Jones' account, which prevents him from presenting, let alone evaluating, Kinsey's more radical views of religion, sex, female psychology, and adolescent behavior. Jones does not explain these issues carefully or provide a framework with which to evaluate them, but instead is often merely superior and snide. He himself articulates some rather parochial, almost homophobic, views. He assumes, for example, that Kinsey harbored deep doubts about his masculinity and felt enormous guilt about his homosexuality, simply assuming that these feelings are intrinsic parts of the homosexual condition, without reliable evidence. Indeed, he insists on calling Kinsey homosexual, despite his sustained marital sexual relations; he thus ignores Kinsey's own classification of the range of sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual,

but does not say why. And, on the last page of his book, Jones claims that "AIDS might have been enough to restore [Kinsey's] faith in a mean-spirited, vengeful God," a statement so grotesque I cannot believe Jones means it.

As a biographical study, Jones' book seems to me a mean-spirited failure. As a treatment of the more important issues raised by Kinsey's work, it also has serious drawbacks. The book gives the initial impression of thoroughness. It includes dozens of quotations from course evaluations, peripheral background on minor participants, and a recurrent account of Kinsey's struggles with



Kinsey and his wife Clara in March 1954. The Kinseys arrive at the airport in Lima, Peru.

the Rockefeller Foundation. But Jones does not provide the background necessary to evaluate Kinsey's achievements. We never find out why Kinsey needed the financial support of the Rockefeller Foundation, since all the royalties from the two reports went back into the institute. In addition, Jones implies several times that Kinsey distorted his results and deceptively used inadequate sampling techniques. This is a serious charge, but Jones never treats it head on; instead, he merely impugns Kinsey's motives, never explaining why he rejected random sampling as inappropriate and adopted his own approach. He never discusses how Kinsey's data stand up to later research nor attempts to account for any differences. Certain background information also appears to be misleading. In his account of the psychoanalytic response to the two Kinsey reports, for ex-

ample, he does not mention Edmund Bergler, who was the psychoanalytic expert on homosexuality and who led the attack. Finally, he does not help the reader to evaluate Kinsey's achievements as a whole, addressing the subject—perhaps the most important in the entire book—in a perfunctory two pages at the end.

Although it is difficult to give the reader a sense of Jones' superior tone of distaste and unsupported innuendo, his careless use of sources should be noted. The details of Kinsey's own sexual behavior—though tactless and mean-spirited—are necessary for Jones' argument. Nevertheless their validity relies on flimsy evidence, employing such locutions as "he probably had tried," "he probably wanted," "it must have been," and "it is hard not to believe." Although, in psychobiography, such procedures are unavoidable, what makes Jones' speculations suspect are, first of all, his deep lack of sympathy for Kinsey and, second, his reliance on a severely limited set of sources and his apparent attempt to conceal this limitation. Some of Jones' account of Kinsey's sexuality is pure speculation or based on gossip. Some seems to be footnoted, but the footnote may lead to a general article on married gays in the 1950s. But the most detailed and distasteful information seems to stem from two sources, whom Jones calls Anon A and Anon B and never identifies, except in the most general way as "a great friend and admirer." Yet the information they offer is quite salacious and defamatory, so the reader needs to be told who these people are to evaluate their reliability. If one traces these sources in the footnotes, one sometimes finds a single quotation attributed to both Anon A and Anon B (for example, p. 603, note 6). Similarly, a "Mr. Y" also "gave a detailed account" (p. 603), but his words are attributed to Anon B in note 8. There is no entry in the index for either of these two "friends," and, in the Note on Sources, we read that all this information was collected in only two interviews, that these sources remain completely anonymous, and that there is no indication that copies or notes of these interviews are on deposit. There are, of course, limitations in oral history, but these must be spelled out for the reader and for future scholars.

The book as a whole, I'm sorry to say—despite occasional informative sections—brings honor neither to its subject nor to its author.

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