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Autor: L.A.

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In Memoriam Dr. Alfred Kinsey



Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, the biologist who has given us our most extensive and objective study of human sexual life, died in Bloomington, Indiana, on August 25th at the age of 62. Dr. Kinsey had been unwell for some six months prior to his death, but his final illness, pneumonia with coronary complications, was brief. The whole world must receive this news with distress, for Dr. Kinsey's great work in sexual research was far from completion at the time of his death, and although he leaves behind him the Institute for Sex Research which he founded at Indiana University, although he leaves with us a staff of well-trained and brilliant scientists to continue the task so well begun, there is no substitute for the

wholesomeness, the burly sanity and the shaggy kindliness, and above all the plain-spoken integrity of the man himself. In the public mind Dr. Kinsey was not an «egg-head», an aloof and bloodless intellectual, but a very human being whose image one could love and revere as earlier generations loved and revered the community doctor. In spite of the — to some — disturbing nature of much that he revealed, one feels that Dr. Kinsey's life and work were very much in the American tradition. He was, in fact, just about the ideal man for the job he undertook.

Alfred C. Kinsey was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1894, the son of a college engineering instructor. His early career is typical of that of thousands of young Americans who enter academic life or the professions. After a boyhood in South Orange, New Jersey, he worked his way through Bowdoin College, Maine, considerably aided by a job as counselor in a boys' camp during vacations. He graduated from Bowdoin with a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology. He went on to Harvard where biology became his major interest and received a Doctor of Science degree in 1920. While at Harvard he made a study of the gall wasp, collecting 150,000 specimens from oak leaves all over the country. He became known among fellow scientists as the world's foremost authority on this insect. In the same year — 1920 — he joined the faculty of Indiana University where he remained until his death. In 1926 he published a text book on biology which has sold nearly half a million copies through the years. Early in his teaching career Dr. Kinsey met his future wife, Clara McMillan then one of his students in a zoology class.

Mrs. Kinsey survives her husband as do three of their four children: two daughters and a son. The Kinsey home in Bloomington is surrounded by two and a half acres of ground where Dr. Kinsey at one time grew a connoisseur's collection of iris and where he raised 170 different kinds of trees. He was a man who, throughout his life, combined the detached scientific outlook with a warmly human, active interest in all living things and in all aspects of life.

It was not until 1938 that Dr. Kinsey began to see the need for the study of human sexuality which was eventually to make him world renowned. In that year he was assigned to teach a course in marriage at Indiana University. He soon found that the minds of his pupils were cluttered with a mixture of old wives' tales, prejudices and anxieties concerning sex. He also discovered that, although he was able to discuss the sexuality of frogs or mice with considerable thoroughness and precision, he could not answer his pupils' questions about human sexuality with any scientific accuracy. He combed the literature on sex for the information his pupils had every right to expect from him but found that the available books on the subject were confusing and contradictory and based on «assumptions that had been unquestioned for centuries — without any scientific validation.»

Public protests quickly ended the marriage course but Dr. Kinsey's realization of the need for a science of human sexuality only deepened. At 44 the short, sandy-haired, stocky professor began his sex research by interviewing his faculty friends and those of the students who were cooperative. Soon the work expanded to a point at which Dr. Kinsey found it necessary to employ a graduate student to assist him, paying him 900 dollars a year out of his own pocket. In 1941 the National Research Council gave him a 1600 dollars grant. In 1942 three widely known scientists visited him to inspect his plans and aims and to submit themselves to personal interviews of the type which Dr. Kinsey and his staff later used throughout the country in gathering case histories. Their report was so favorable that Dr. Kinsey began getting research grants from many sources. In 1947 he founded the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University and arranged that all royalties from the sale of his projected series of books on sex should be paid to the Institute. He himself has never received a penny from the books which have made him famous. To his other fine qualities we must add dedication and disinterestedness.

Sexual Behavior in the Human Male was published without fanfare in 1948 by a conservative firm of medical publishers. It caused an immediate sensation nonetheless because of the enormous discrepancy it revealed between the professed morality and the actual sex behavior of American males. Although a high-priced book, over 500,000 copies have been sold. As might be expected it met with a storm of opposition, yet from the beginning it was recognized by perhaps a majority of scientists and other professional people as the broadest and most soundly fact-based study of human sexuality ever to be made.

It would be impossible to summarize the book briefly. It is dedicated «To the twelve thousand persons who have contributed to these data».

The first 150 pages are given over to a discussion of objectives and methods. One is particularly impressed by the extreme care which was taken to insure accuracy on the tricky statistical and mathematical side of things. The book wisely remains within the limits of what is observable and measurable, avoiding as much as possible the shifty subjective elements in sexual life. It may be said that this study deals with sex as a vast fabric of human activity in which each of the varieties of sexual expression appears as a thread of the same substance as the rest but differing in coloration, in strength and in the type of motif for which it is employed. One of the most interesting features of the book is its thorough investigation of the relationship between sexual patterns and social and educational status. It reveals clearly the differences in tastes, attitudes and mores which cause mutual incomprehension between the various social classes in the United States. It distinguishes between rural and urban sexual behavior. It investigates the effect of religion upon sexual activity. It assesses the strength of the sexual urge at each stage of life while also showing the wide differences in the sexual needs of individuals, both as to quantity and kind of outlet.

Every homosexual owes Dr. Kinsey and his co-workers an enormous debt of gratitude. In the first place, he assures us that at least half the male population has experienced homosexual desires at one time or another. We are not nearly as «queer» as we may have thought. Dr. Kinsey estimates that one mature U.S. male out of every four has had «more than incidental homosexual experience over at least a three year period» of his life. He also tells us that 4% of the male citizens of this country are exclusively homosexual. He assures us that there is nothing intrinsically unnatural, criminal or perverse about such desires. «The homosexual has been a significant part of human sexual activity ever since the dawn of history, primarily because it is an expression of capacities that are basic in the human animal.»

However great the special interest of this book for homosexuals its chief value is that it provides us with a clear, intricately correlated, overall picture of the actual operation of the sexual instinct in a complex society. It provides us with a mental map of one vital aspect of life which is more in harmony with objective reality than any view of it available before. It is safe to say that every individual willing to make a careful study of the «Kinsey Report» will merge with a far better orientation to his world and, as a consequence, a new sense of being at home in it. No less importantly it provides a sound basis for mutual understanding among all kinds and categories of men.

In 1953 Dr. Kinsey and his associates brought out *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. On the whole it showed woman as more stable and conservative in her sexual life than the free-wheeling male. One of the surprises of the book is the low incidence of homosexuality among women as compared to men. By and large, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* is a direct continuation of the first, volume and what may be said of the significance of the first is applicable also to its sequel.

Dr. Kinsey once estimated that it would take a large, expert staff thirty years to complete this study of human sexuality. He expected his

findings to fill, ultimately, nine volumes. At the time of his death the Institute for Sex Research was collecting material for studies of the sex activity of men in prisons, of Europeans, and of animals. Some years ago Dr. Kinsey stated that one of his projected books was to deal with «the homosexual-heterosexual balance». However, at the time of his death no new book was near completion.

To many people the findings of Dr. Kinsey were, of course, deeply disturbing. Religious leaders, educators, legislators, literary men of the more reactionary sort found fault with the materialism and empiricism of Dr. Kinsey's approach, yet his «reports» have made a profound impression upon all those who are more deeply devoted to the forthright yet complex truth than to the maintenance of familiar illusions. Dr. Kinsey's influence is already to be found in the thinking on sexual questions of the Moral Welfare Council of the Church of England, and his findings are reflected in the Model Penal Code drawn up by the distinguished and influential American Law Institute to serve as a guide to legal reform in the United States. These are only two of the more conspicuous examples of the impact of Dr. Kinsey's work, and perhaps its greatest value has been to dissipate the false and dangerous «innocence» of the ordinary citizen where sex is concerned and to replace it by a view of human erotic life more in keeping with the actual facts. Thanks to Dr. Kinsey we may look forward to a more enlightened and tolerant climate of opinion in the future.

I have said that the great, good Dr. Kinsey is one of those irreplaceable men, yet, on the title page of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* authorship is not credited to Alfred C. Kinsey alone, but to the entire staff of the Institute for Sex Research, thirteen individuals. Opposite the title page five distinguished «consulting editors» are listed. Taken together these eighteen represent the interaction of many different scientific disciplines. Large scale modern research is, in its nature, a cooperative form of human endeavor. Dr. Kinsey has created his own living memorial in the Institute for Sex Research and we may be confident that the work so bravely inaugurated and so soundly and brilliantly advanced by him will be carried through to the monumental conclusion for which he planned — and perhaps, who knows, far beyond any results he could have anticipated.

L. A.

Those who see any difference between soul and body have neither.

There is a fatality about all good resolutions. They are invariably made too soon.

The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything.

Oscar Wilde.