




BOOK REVIEW

Alison Bashford. *The Huxleys: An Intimate History of Evolution*

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In *The Huxleys: An Intimate History of Evolution*, Alison Bashford has found an ambitious and engaging way to combine biography and the history of science: as she explains, “[t]he family history of the Huxleys doubles as an account of evolving ideas about generations and genealogies, genes and eugenics” (xxxiii). The project began as the Wiles Lectures at Queen’s University, Belfast, 2018, and has turned into an inventive and highly readable multi-generational biography. Treating Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–95) and his grandson Julian Sorrell Huxley (1887–1975) as “one long-lived man” (xxviii), 1825–1975, allows her to consider key shifts in the idea of evolution as well as the particular dramas of the sprawling Huxley family. Because of the breadth of her research and of the topics covered, this book will be enormously useful to a wide range of scholars, including those working on the history of evolution and animal studies but also those considering the remaking of British influence in the postwar period.

Approaching these topics through biography brings all the benefits but also the limitations of the genre. Bashford fully embraces the idea of “inheritance,” and of Julian as the “Inheritor” of his grandfather’s scientific legacy (a sobriquet first given him by his less-scientifically-influential father Leonard on the night of his birth, 3). Sometimes this seems to imply literal genetics, as in the burden of depression from which multiple Huxleys suffered (chapter 3), but sometimes this blurs with the family’s legacy in British intellectual life, as when she writes of Julian using “his family’s special expertise” to write the first draft of UNESCO’s *Purpose and Philosophy* (320). As in any biography, and despite tracing multiple generations, at times the focus on a narrow range of individuals can seem to overemphasize the work of even these very influential men, leaving it difficult to get a sense of their place in a wider conversation.

What Bashford gains by concentrating on Thomas Henry Huxley and grandson Julian Huxley is a series of fascinating juxtapositions between the Victorian and modern, considering the difference between, for instance, Thomas Henry’s focus on the anatomy of dead animals against Julian’s fascination with the “ritual” behaviors of living ones (chapters 4–6; see, e.g., 128, 136, 140, 146). Through these examples, the book provides a compelling introduction to the changing face(s) of evolutionary thinking before and after Darwin as well as before and after the Holocaust and (to a lesser extent) decolonization. The drama of the family provides other ways of seeing change across the period; especially compelling are the different fates of the members of the family struggling with mental health, as we see changes in social and medical treatment across generations (chapter 3). But this is no simple tale of scientific progress; Bashford is equally interested in cycles of return. Thomas Henry

and Julian, as well as novelist Aldous (Julian's brother) and anthropologist Francis (Julian's son) provide rich material to consider modern "re-enchantment" and attempts to combine science and spirituality (chapter 10).

Like Thomas Henry and his use of microscopes to contribute to theories of evolution, the book thus moves constantly between the micro and the macro, but there is a strange absence of the middledistance of history; we move in the realm of one family and grand ideas, with a minimum of other contexts. For instance, while Bashford occasionally acknowledges that nineteenth-century ideas about race are "odious" to us (246), she seems hesitant to call it out too often, or to consider the implications of both Huxleys' work in terms of the power relations of the period she has laid out, 1825–1975: the rise and fall of the New Imperialism. The strangest result, for this reader at least, was the lack of discussion around the British Empire itself, which made possible Thomas Henry Huxley's first voyages to Australia and the South Pacific in the 1840s and shaped the production and reception of his science as well as his grandson's expertise. This seems especially true of the work of Julian Huxley, whose writings against Nazism, trips to Africa, work for UNESCO, founding of the World Wildlife Fund, nature films, work on wildlife conservation, population fears, and work on eugenics all seem to be part of a larger story about the remaking of British power in the post-war period. (For an interesting comparison, see Erika Rappaport's 2017 *Thirst for Empire*, e.g. 291.) Julian had an important role in remaking the British image as colonizers into anti-fascists and conservationists, part of the new world order, but that kind of perspective is not one that Bashford seems interested in tracing.

The topics in the second half of the book in general seem less compatible with the genre of biography. Bashford has written extensively on population and eugenics (such as *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth* [2014], *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus: Rereading the Principle of Population* [2016], with Joyce E. Chapin, and the *Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* [2010], with Philippa Levine). But it is disconcerting to hear only about the various Huxleys' ideas about these topics without reference to questions of white supremacy and eugenics' racist applications (including in California, which Julian Huxley saw as the "good" example in contrast to the Nazis' "bad" one, e.g., 348). Bashford may wish to applaud Julian's contribution to the 1934 anti-racist (and anti-Nazi) book (with Alfred Cort Haddon and the uncredited Charles Seligman) *We Europeans*, but the implications of his population fears and his long interest in eugenics would have benefited from a broader context and analysis of continuing racial power imbalances. Even with these caveats, however, *The Huxleys* will furnish scholars from many fields with its insight, research, and innovative approach for years to come.