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The Huxleys: An Intimate History of Evolution

by Alison Bashford. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. \$30.00. xxxix + 529 p.; ill.; index. ISBN: 978-0-226-72011-1 (hc); 0-226-72011-X (be). 2022.

Too often is evolution seen as a matter of abstract ideas. Here we have an excellent work that makes it personal. Darwin, as one might expect, has already received his share of biographies; the Huxleys are now none the poorer. The years covered in Bashford's book are 1825-1975, when Thomas Henry Huxley was born (economically christened 'Huxley'), and when Julian Sorrell Huxley died ('Julian'), a period regarded 'as one very long-lived man' (p. xxiii). Those 'vital dates', Bashford writes, 'bookended the colossal shifts in world history from the age of sail to the space age' (p. xxiii). The analyses of those shifts, with a focus on Huxley and Julian, are a strong delight, intellectually helpful to view changing understandings about 'evolution'.

Professionally, 'evolution' changed much between Huxley and Julian. It was hard for Huxley. After many ill-fated applications, he finally gained a position at the Jermyn Street School of Mines in 1854. And this was how he tried to make evolution 'Huxleyan', Bashford writing that, from now, 'science belonged to him and his growing circle of true believers in provable hypotheses' (p. 62). It was easier for 1910s-20s Julian, quickly finding positions at Rice University, Oxford, and KCL. And Julian, unlike his grandfather, did accept natural selection, even 'rethought Darwinism in the light of Mendelism' (p. 74). Between them, 'evolution' had a different professional and theoretical face.

It also changed methodologically. 'Between these Huxleys', Bashford wrote, 'we can see zoology transforming from morphology to ethology, from taxonomy to ecology, and from the primacy of dead animals to the enchantment of live ones' (p. 128). And 'evolution' clearly changed politically as well. While they both saw humanity as part of one race, Huxley still showed signs of support for an 'Aryan Race', with which Julian later did away (pp. 264-5). This had a personal side. Julian, unlike his grandfather, saw his mental problems passed on Mendelian-style: a trait circulating within a population, not an essence of it. But that did not stop Julian to try breeding out the 'weak-minded' (p. 347). For him, though not racial, progress was nevertheless hierarchical.

Those comparisons are only possible thanks to Bashford's astounding coverage of material. So broad is the reach, that, focusing on the 'intimate', the history feels as if it sometimes jumped over some time-periods, revealing gaps. For instance, as told here, Julian seems to have inevitably accepted Mendelian Genetics. What did it really mean to him? Focusing on the 'intimate', Julian's Oxford years are barely covered. It would be wrong, however, to over-emphasise the 'too' intimate. The book uniquely sheds more light on Huxley and Julian's personal relationships with their partners, peeling out complex emotional lives. And it explores what the idea of 'evolution' meant as a way of life: for Julian it was 'to feel at one with the general current of life and its direction' (p. 408). It is another benefit of Bashford's book that one can ask questions about when to also 'de-intimate' an otherwise deeply personal history.

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