

Aldous Huxley - An English Intellectual

Nicholas Murray

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Huxley stemmed from a distinguished Victorian family, counting as his paternal grandfather Darwin's prophet - Thomas Huxley, and as his maternal - Matthew Arnold. Due to early troubles of the eyes, which initially threatened complete blindness and continued throughout his life to be a constant fixation, he was excluded from a scientific career and instead settled for a literary one, which one suspects anyway was more congenial to him. Thus he was reduced to live on his wits mediated through his pen, and he turned out to be quite successful at it.

Huxley certainly was subjected to far more esteem during his life than posterity has seemed fit to endow his reputation with after his death. Nowadays he might mostly be remembered for 'Brave New World' predating Orwell's '1984' with more than a decade, but by now quite eclipsed by the latter. Huxley thought that his nightmarish vision, which he at its time of inception comfortably thought to project hundreds of years into the future, (only to fear its far closer immediacy towards the end of his life), was far more sophisticated than the raw picture drawn by Orwell, and he might very well have been right. But to insist that is somehow to miss the point.

Did Huxley 'miss the point'? He certainly was quite clever, and quite educated, a cerebral creature who thrived on reading and thinking; but mere cleverness, however impressive, is in the long run not quite enough. He certainly admitted to the world that he was no Natural Novelist, although he had chosen to frame most of his major work in that form. Huxley was basically an essayist, dedicated to ponder the deeper things in life. In some ways one would think he would have been superbly prepared for this task, comfortably spanning the supposed divide between the world of science and the world of the humanities (in fact during the very end of his life he commented and published on the raging Snow-Leavis controversy, without making a lasting impact). But his clear rationalist point of view were in latter years somewhat sullied by his forays into mysticism, his enthusiasm for eastern thought and cast into serious doubt by his gullibility as to para-psychological phenomena. He was also in a way a pioneer of the drug-culture of the 60's, experimenting first with mescaline and later with LSD already in the fifties. His rather meagre experiences were dutifully written up, and may be more documentations of the workings of a deprived brain rather than one opened up to transcendent insights.

His life was charmed, although not devoid of tragedy. His mother died while he was still a child, and an elder brother committed suicide in his early youth. He was part of the Garsington Manor Circle, resided over by the ubiquitous Ottoline Morell, providing him with themes for his early fictional work, as well as an opportunity to meet his future wife, the slender Belgian woman - Maria Ny, of ambiguous sexual orientation, and liberal views on Open Marriages. (One gets the impression that the more worldly Maria set him up with suitable girlfriends to keep up with the current fads of the day.) His wife would in fact, until her death in her fifties, devote herself to taking care of this cerebral baby that was

Huxley, who never deigned to lend a practical hand in the running of their life. Sensing his helplessness she no doubt engineered a successor, whom he in due time gracefully accepted.

Life in the early years were mostly spent on the continent, be it in Italy or France. In the late 30's they went temporarily to the States, but world events made a sustained stay a judicious option, and in fact they would stay on in California until their respective deaths. Huxley was quickly involved in Hollywood as a script-writer, a drudgery to which he quickly adapted and became reasonably competent at. That the pay was very good certainly was a factor. Once again they became part of a charmed circle, involving the likes of Isherwood, Chaplin, Garbo and the astronomer Hubble and his wife. But, the biographer Murray assures us, the social life of the Huxleys during their Californian exile was quite restricted, preferring as they did to keep to themselves.

Nicholas Murray has provided a competent, but yet very wooden account of the life of Huxley. Like all serious biographer he has diligently done his research on the subject, and thus he is like most of his hard-working colleagues, reluctant to let most of it go to waste. Still one senses that there has been a dearth of material. Murray very much regrets the fire in the late fifties that destroyed almost all of the documentation, like the letters exchanged between him and his wife, and carefully preserved under many journeys and moves. Also his entire library filled with his books fully annotated, became the victim of the blaze. To Huxley it must have been a severe blow, like a first brush with the great reaper, reminding him that as you die everything will be stripped away from you. But to a surviving chronicler it must be more exasperating than traumatic, and one wonders what kind of biographies of Huxley would have been forthcoming had the relevant source material survived intact.

So what kind of person was Huxley? The inner life evades you¹, the glimpses you get is one of sweetness and egocentricity, practical incompetence, and an impressive flair, that in later years came out well on TV for American audiences. And he worked hard, constantly writing, and consequently with a respectable output of novels, essays, and journalistic writings. The writing he kept up until almost the last day of his life, when he finally realised the terminal nature of his affliction and as one of his last wishes, incidentally on the very day Kennedy was shot, asked for an injection of LSD.

In fairness though, even if the opinions of Huxley now may strike us as stale and hackneyed, one should keep in mind that he was at the time ahead of the same, and in fact did belong to those who at an early stage questioned the case of unlimited scientific and economic progress, and not only out of mere sentimentality; as well as becoming concerned with environmental decay, and the horrors of mindless consumerism. Certainly he was a sentimentalist, and an elitist such, which would curry him little favour nowadays; yet he gave articulate expression for his despair, which in time may possibly earn him renewed respect.

¹ Murray refers to a 'love-letter' written to his second wife, a rather maudlin, awkward effort, more likely intended to try to flame a passion not present than to mediate a deeper glow, and somewhat surprisingly takes it at face value as a testimony to the sincerity of Huxley's tenderer feelings. Of course Murray could be ironic, but if so he would be very cruel, and why would he in that case take the trouble to write the biography of a man he would so despise and denigrate?

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