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The Huxleys

Libraries abound, and in surprising places sometimes. Until I read the excellent “The Huxleys: An Intimate History of Evolution” by Alison Bashford (2022), I could not have guessed that papers and books from Julian Huxley’s personal life and library are held, or more accurately “sequestered,” in this country, in Rice University Archives. Julian was grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley, close associate of and advocate for Charles Darwin. Julian, renowned in his right for many accomplishments, was the founding head of the biology department at Rice University, Rice Institute.

Bashford is Laureate Professor in History and Director of the Laureate Centre for Population at the University of New South Wales in Australia.

The overlapping span of the two Huxley lives, 1825-2075, marks an immensely vital period, not only in the progress of science in general, but in the understanding of animal behavior and human life on this planet. Perhaps more to the point, the period marks a whole family’s attempt to understand what it means to be alive and then to not be alive.

The Rice University Fondren Library web site says this: “Julian Sorell Huxley, the grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley and great-nephew of Matthew Arnold, was born June 22, 1887. The union of the Huxley and Arnold families brought about a happy combination of what Julian’s younger brother Aldous would call ‘blue genes’, but the combined family traditions also imposed an obligation of intellectual excellence and social responsibility. This obligation was keenly felt by Julian Huxley from an early age. It was enhanced by his affinity for the interests which had earned his grandfather his place in the history of science, and thus, it soon became apparent that young Julian would be Thomas Huxley’s intellectual heir as well as his grandson. This inheritance would prove both a joy and a burden, for while Julian Huxley achieved great renown as a scientist and popularizer of science, he was plagued, like his grandfather, by serious and debilitating attacks of depression. In spite of this he was able, throughout a long career, to contribute significantly to the fields of ethology, ecology and cancer research, and to act effectively as a powerful proponent of neo-Darwinism.”

That is as well and as concisely as one can state the importance of this one family, about which Bashford has a lot more to tell in wonderful detail. Of that longer story, Julian’s time at Rice was relatively brief, 1913-16 on and off; yet, that is where his voluminous personal papers and a book collection are to be found. How the papers collection came to Rice is described in greater detail in M.S. Dix, “The Cornerstone: The Newsletter of the Rice Historical Society,” V. 1, No. 9, Winter 2004.

The collection is available for research only, for the very few such as Bashford with academic credentials and interests. This is not a lending library as most of us experience a library, but an original collection of personally written materials and published books authored, inherited, and collected for the ages. A natural history collection that conjoins “geology and anthropology, biology and theology, ecology and

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sociology” from a time dating back to Thomas Henry Huxley and Charles Darwin when the modern sciences of molecular biology and genetics were yet to be known.

Julian Huxley himself said it best: “a row of black marks on a page can move a man to tears, though the bones of him that wrote it are long ago crumbled to dust.” And that is just one more way to give meaning to the word “Library.”

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