

NO 24 ALDOUS HUXLEY

21 September 2009

1. The last few talks before the summer break were about scientists. Today, I am going to talk about a famous literary supporter of the AT, the English writer Aldous Huxley (1894-1963).
2. Huxley had his first lessons from Alexander himself in 1935 and was an immediate convert. He became friendly with Alexander and maintained an interest in the AT for the rest of life.
3. He also wrote about the AT and because of his own fame he greatly raised its public profile. Two of his books, *Eyeless in Giza* and *Ends and Means* have substantial references to the AT and are often quoted in support of it.
4. Huxley was also a devotee of the Bates Method of vision improvement. He wrote a book called *The Art of Seeing* which provided enormous publicity for the Bates Method and hugely annoyed Alexander.
5. Alexander mentions Huxley in various places in the *Universal Constant in Living* and includes an article by him as an Appendix. Michael Bloch's biography of Alexander also has lots of references to Huxley – just look up the index.
6. Frank Pierce Jones also refers to him in various places and says that reading Huxley was the reason he began to take an interest in the AT.
7. Huxley therefore has an important place in the AT so I will try to give you an overall picture of the man and his work.
8. My main source for the details of his life is a very comprehensive biography called *Aldous Huxley: an English intellectual* by Nicholas Murray which was published in 2002.
9. I have also read a memoir called *This Timeless Moment: a personal view of Aldous Huxley* written by Huxley's second wife and widow – Laura Archera Huxley, which Ruth mentioned to me. This deals with the last eight years of his life.¹
10. There is also an article on Huxley in the AT journal *Direction* Vol 2 No 7 focusing on Huxley's AT and Bates Method interests

¹ Laura Huxley (1968)p

by Louise Gauld. She is an AT teacher in New Zealand and she interviewed Laura Huxley for this article in 1998.

11. As for the man himself, Huxley was born in Surrey into an upper middle-class intellectual family in 1894. He was the third son of Leonard Huxley, a classics master at Charterhouse School – a well-known public school.
12. His paternal grandfather was Thomas Henry Huxley, an eminent Victorian scientist and strong supporter of Darwin who was known as “Darwin’s bulldog”. On the maternal side, his mother’s uncle was the poet and literary critic Matthew Arnold. Her sister, Huxley’s aunt, Mary Augusta, was a well-known Victorian novelist who wrote under her married name of Mrs Humphry Ward.
13. Aldous was the youngest of three brothers. The oldest became famous as Sir Julian Huxley, a prominent evolutionary biologist and internationalist who became Secretary General of UNESCO and was one of the founders of the World Wildlife Fund.
14. Aldous was a bright young boy growing up in a cultured household. But at the age of nine he was sent to a dreadful preparatory boarding school. The teaching was awful, and there was a huge amount of bullying. This is what the English upper middle class did to their children. Aldous survived it, partly by withdrawing into himself, and reading a lot.
15. At the age of fourteen he went to Eton, the top English public school. In his first year there, his mother, to whom he was deeply attached, was diagnosed with cancer and died quite quickly afterwards at the age of 45. This was a huge blow to him. He grew up a shy and retiring boy and his continued sense of loss is often reflected in his novels.
16. In 1911, when he was sixteen, he suffered an attack of *staphylococcus aureus*. This is a common bacterium which causes a wide variety of ailments from relatively minor things like boils through to very dangerous things like meningitis.
17. In Huxley’s time, before antibiotics, it was quite difficult to cure. It then became easy to cure when penicillin became available but then it became resistant to penicillin and they had to use methicillin against it. It has now become resistant to methicillin and is known as MRSA – *methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus*.

18. As a result of his attack Huxley suffered severe inflammation of the cornea – the hard clear bit – in both eyes. When the infection died down, both eyes were severely damaged. The condition is known as *keratitis punctata*.
19. His right eye was nine-tenths blind and the other was affected quite badly. In addition to the opacity of the cornea, he was suffering from astigmatism and hyperopia – long sightedness. In effect, he was almost completely blind. This meant that he could not read – which was a huge blow.
20. His biographer says Huxley always believed this damage to his eyes was the most important single determining event in his early life.² It probably had a lot to do with the fact that he developed an extremely good memory.
21. The immediate result was that he had to leave Eton and live at home. He was provided with a variety of private tutors including the young Kenneth Clark who became the famous art historian.
22. Huxley was always a determined and brave character and instead of brooding on his misfortune, over the next two years he kept himself extremely busy. He quickly learned Braille so he could continue reading – he said it took him only three or four weeks.³
23. He spent some time in Germany learning German. He also spent a month in Grenoble learning French – which his biographer said he could always speak and write effortlessly.⁴
24. After about two years, his sight had recovered sufficiently for him to be able to read with a powerful magnifying glass. Using this to study, he passed the entrance exam to Balliol College Oxford in 1913.⁵
25. At the end of his first year in Oxford, his older brother Trevenen, to whom Aldous was very attached, committed suicide. This was the third major blow he suffered in his youth and he was deeply and permanently affected by all three.
26. But again he quickly picked himself up and joined the brilliant intellectual set surrounding the famous literary hostess Lady

² Murray (2002)p31

³ Ibid. p33

⁴ Ibid. p36

⁵ Ibid. p35

Ottoline Morrell who lived in Garsington Manor near Oxford. There and later he got to know all the literary figures of the time, including Bertrand Russell, T S Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, J M Keynes and the rest of the Bloomsbury set – as well as D H Lawrence who remained a lifelong friend.

27. Huxley had grown up to be extremely tall – 6 ft 4 inches (193 cm) – incredibly thin, and stooped. Virginia Woolf said when he was sitting down in an armchair he looked like a giant grasshopper.
28. The First World War began in 1914 and he volunteered for military service but was rejected as completely unfit for it. He continued with his studies and left Oxford with a first class degree in 1916. He then had to find a way of making a living but since he hated paid work and only wanted to be a writer this was difficult.
29. The Morells employed him as a labourer on their farm in Garsington Manor. Given his physical state, it was a rather improbable job. He was always beautifully dressed and his brother Julian's wife said *...he looked absent-mindedly but absurdly romantic and beautiful.*⁶ Apparently he liked chasing escaped pigs and chopping wood.
30. The Morell farm probably did not benefit greatly from his services but during this time, he wrote his first book of poems.
31. During the next couple of years, he had short spells working as a government clerk and as a teacher in Eton. Neither was a great success. The fact that he could not see his pupils made for some classroom difficulties in Eton. But, during this time, he managed to publish two more books of poems.
32. He married Maria Lys, in 1919. She had grown up in Belgium and he met her in Garsington. They had a rather open marriage, typical of the literary set to which they belonged. She was bisexual and one of the features of their marriage was that she worked to win the affections of attractive young women so that both she and Aldous could have affairs with them.⁷
33. She also devoted herself totally to looking after him. She made his arrangements, read to him, drove him everywhere, and they remained happily married until her death in 1955. She

⁶ Ibid. p74

⁷ Ibid. p140

had plenty to do as they lived an extraordinarily restless life, changing house and even countries, every two or three years.

34. They had a son Matthew who was born in 1920 but whatever their financial problems, they employed a maid to look after him. He does not seem to have unduly interfered with their life and they went off for an eleven-month tour of the Far East in 1925 when he was five.
35. He actually became a prominent anthropologist and epidemiologist and died in 2005 at the age of eighty-four.
36. Meanwhile, Aldous managed to get work as a writer with *House and Garden* magazine and in 1921, published his first novel *Chrome Yellow*. In all, he published fifty books as well as loads of magazine articles, book reviews and film scripts. This is an average of over a published book a year, for the forty-seven years he worked as a writer.
37. Through the 1920s, he produced a sequence of smart, cynical novels including *Antic Hay*, *Those Barren Leaves* and *Point Counter Point* plus various travel books and collections of essays.
38. The novels are bright, sharp satires on various aspects of the upper middle class English world of his time. They have little depth of character but they are clever and well-written. I remember really enjoying them in the 1950s. Huxley himself said "*By profession I am an essayists who sometimes writes novels and biographies.*"⁸
39. The novels were rather daring for their time and were satisfactorily denounced by the right-wing papers, so Huxley became increasingly famous.
40. In 1932, his best-known book *Brave New World* was published. This is set in the far future and is a pessimistic view of the evolution of human society. People are specially bred in test-tubes for their job and place in society and are kept happy by drugs and sex.
41. At this stage, Huxley was becoming worried about the rise of fascism in Europe which he was seeing at first hand in his travels. He was moving to the left politically, and becoming interested in pacifism.

⁸ Ibid. p161

42. In 1934, he began writing *Eyeless in Gaza* - which is a quote from one of Milton's poems. It tells the story of a Huxley-like character called Anthony Beavis, who is a very clever social theorist but is deeply cynical about people. According to the blurb of the book, "...he betrays friendship and toys cruelly with the affections of women." But in reality he is afraid of becoming involved in real life.

43. This novel was Huxley's way of trying to work out a way forward for himself and for his developing ideas about society but he became stuck. His eyes were giving him enormous problems and he had terrible insomnia.

44. Basically, he was in a dreadful physical and mental state. He found he could only work on the book when lying on his back with the typewriter on his chest.⁹

45. He then discovered Alexander and began daily lessons with him in 1935. Michael Bloch says:

*The results were dramatic: within one month, he was able to overcome shyness and disability to make a public speech for the first time in years;*¹⁰

46. Huxley was so impressed with the results that he persuaded Maria to have lessons as well.

47. As Bloch says, Huxley, like Dewey, not only benefited hugely from the AT, he became intellectually fascinated by it.

48. It also gave him a way forward in his novel. Huxley introduced a character called Dr Miller who is partly based on Alexander and is an Alexander teacher. In the novel, he quotes from the diary of his Anthony Beavis character who has just had a lesson from Miller:

*Miller believes possible a non-theological praxis of meditation. Which he would like, of course, to couple with training, along F.M. Alexander's lines, in use of the self, beginning with physical control and achieving through it (since mind and body are one) control of impulses and feelings'*¹¹

⁹ Jones (1976)p55

¹⁰ Bloch (2004)p158

¹¹ Huxley (1936)p10

49. The book cuts backwards and forwards in time with occasional direct references to Miller. On page 212, for example, he again quotes from his character's diary

At today's lesson with Miller found myself suddenly a step forward in my grasp of the theory and practice of the technique. To learn proper use one must first inhibit all improper uses of the self. Refuse to be hurried into gaining ends by the equivalent (in personal, psycho-physiological terms) of violent revolution; inhibit this tendency, concentrate on the means whereby the end is to be achieved; then act.¹²

50. Once he had finished *Eyeless in Gaza*, which was published in 1936, Huxley got on with his pacifism and wrote a book called *An Encyclopaedia of Pacifism*.

51. He and Maria then went to the US and he produced the book called *Ends and Means* which was published in 1937. It is basically a philosophical discussion on the nature of society and it was hugely successful. The copy I have is from the sixth impression.

52. In one place he refers directly to what he calls the system of physical education developed by F M. Alexander and says:

Complete understanding of the system can only come with the practice of it. All I need say in this place is that I am sure, as a matter of personal experience and observation, that it gives us all the things we have been looking for in a system of physical education: relief from strain due to maladjustment, and consequent improvement in physical and mental health; increased consciousness of the physical means employed to gain the ends proposed by the will and, along with this, a general heightening of consciousness at all levels...¹³

53. That is all we have time for today. Next time I will tell you about Huxley's involvement in the Bates' Method of vision improvement and Alexander's quite cross reaction to it, and the rest of Huxley's story.

¹² Ibid. p212

¹³ Huxley (1937)p223

References

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