Aldous Huxley

A Beginner's Guide

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Kieron O'Hara

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Contents

For my dear friend Susan

Preface

Aldous Huxley's celebrity has not dimmed in the half-century or so since his death. Dozens of his works remain in print, some with introductions by authors as eminent as Margaret Atwood and J.G. Ballard. Googling his name produces as many hits as Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Jeffrey Eugenides put together. His most famous novel, *Brave New World*, regularly appears in lists of the 'best books' (for example, as the best work by an English author in a *Le Monde* poll at the end of the century), and at the time of writing it enjoys a ranking comfortably in the top 500 bestsellers on amazon.com, amazon.co.uk and amazon.fr (it is 618th on amazon.de). We can see Huxley's likeness at the National Portrait Gallery, and on the cover of The Beatles' album *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*; the rock band The Doors took their name from one of his books. He is simultaneously part of high culture and popular culture.

Yet these bald statistics and facts raise the question of why we continue to read Huxley, and the deeper one of whether we should. He wrote in a world very different to ours, where democracy was threatened first by fascism, then by communism, where the power of science was becoming visible, where the mass media and mass production were emerging, and where traditions, canons and value-systems were being reassessed after traumatic decades of violence and bloodshed. He wrote as an old order was being swept aside by a morally ambiguous progress. In many ways, Huxley's world is barely recognisable from a twenty-first-century standpoint. Our world is the *result* of the revolutions Huxley describes.

The nature of the revolutionary forces themselves, Huxley's subject matter, is irrelevant; they have done their work, they cannot be reversed. Huxley lived in a world of possibilities which from our perspective are simply yesterday's speculations. What can he possibly have to say to us?

To understand that, we have first to understand what Huxley was saying to his contemporaries. The aim of this book is to enable a reader to approach the work of Aldous Huxley understanding its context, both in terms of Huxley's own thought, and the politically and intellectually fraught times upon which he commentated. In the five decades of Huxley's writing career, he changed his position on many substantive issues. So the world changed too, although a common thread of violence and totalitarianism runs through the middle of the twentieth century. His first stories appeared while the Battle of the Somme raged; his final work appeared just a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis. To be able to read Huxley, one needs to know what stage his thought had reached when he was writing, particularly as he often worked out his ideas laboriously in print over a series of books or essays. As Joyce Cary argued, Huxley's 'revolt was moral. It was founded in hatred of the lie.'[1] But what Huxley would put in place of the lie depended on the state of his thinking, and the social, technological and political context of his writing.

To that end, this book describes Huxley's life in seven stages, six of which cover his writing career. This is an artifice, like any such division, but it produces the best clustering of his large output. Each major chapter contains three sections. The first sketches the main events in his life – important for understanding Huxley, who incorporated many autobiographical and semi-autobiographical elements into his fiction.

The next 'Works', gives a short summary and background of each of Huxley's prose works. I have not included the poetry, of which there were half a dozen collections of original work between 1916 and 1931, partly because his *oeuvre* is slight, and

partly because there is rarely a *philosophical* insight in his poetry that is not better expressed in prose; I have also left out his several plays and adaptations for similar reasons. I have included all the novels, the original collections of short stories and essays, the full-length political and philosophical works, the travel books, the biographical histories, the anthologies and four pamphlets and Forewords, that were published in Huxley's lifetime and therefore approved by the author himself. Altogether that is forty-one works, each of which has a short section devoted to it in the appropriate chapter.

The third section, 'Thought', attempts a synthetic summation of Huxley's thinking in each particular period. Certain themes, such as language, value, education, popular culture, ideology and sex, recur, but always with a different twist, depending on Huxley's development at the time.

This book is therefore intended to orient the reader to Huxley's work, to allow him or her to follow Huxley's thought on a particular topic, or to understand a particular work by Huxley in the context in which it was written. It is not a substitute for deep critical analysis. I have referenced useful sources and quotations, but have not given page references for quotations from Huxley himself. This is partly to avoid the book being taken up by dozens of footnotes, but mainly because most of Huxley's works appear in several editions, and so page references are unlikely to be helpful. This Beginner's Guide is not aimed at the scholar with access to all of Huxley's first editions. I hope the reader will be motivated to dig deeper.

My final prefatory task is to thank Oneworld for editorial support and wise words on how to present Huxley's work, and an anonymous reader of the text who gave me several useful comments, and who filled a few glaring gaps in the 'Further reading' section at the end. Of course, the responsibility for the completed text is entirely mine.

1

'Inescapable social destiny', 1894–1920

The Huxleys and the Arnolds

Aldous Huxley's intellectual and social inheritance was extraordinary. His grandfather was one of the greatest Victorian scientists, Thomas Henry (T.H.) Huxley (1825–95), known as 'Darwin's bulldog' for his tireless popularisation of secular evolutionary theory. The 1860 Oxford debate pitting T.H. against Bishop Samuel Wilberforce (a well-known high churchman known as 'Soapy Sam') was one of the great set pieces of Victorian public life; famously, when asked by Wilberforce whether it was through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed descent from an ape, Huxley replied that although he would not be ashamed to have a monkey for an ancestor, he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used his great gifts to obscure the truth. He was sceptical about religion, and coined the word 'agnostic' to describe himself. Yet he did not fight shy of ethical dilemmas, arguing that although mental characteristics are a product of evolution, values are culturally determined, and hence one is not absolved from the duty to make ethical decisions simply because certain aspects of one's mind are biologically determined.

His role in public debate made him a household name, but he was also a pioneering zoologist and anatomist in his own right. He also was an important educationalist, promoting scientific education at secondary level (in the London School Board), tertiary level (with the Royal School of Mines, now a constituent

college of Imperial College, London) and for adults (he was Principal of the South London Working Men's College). The combination of respect for science, concern with the public welfare, and interest not only in ethical issues themselves but also in the way they are influenced by scientific understanding and technological development, was imbued in the Huxley family.

Aldous's other grandfather was literary scholar Tom Arnold (1823–1900), which linked him with the dynasty of another Victorian patriarch (his great-grandfather) Thomas Arnold, legendary headmaster of Rugby School, immortalised in the novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Tom Arnold's older brother, Huxley's great-uncle, was the poet, social critic and philosopher Matthew Arnold (1822–88). One of Tom's daughters was Mary Augusta Ward (1851–1920), who as Mrs Humphry Ward achieved fame as a prolific and bestselling novelist, of which her best-known effort was *Robert Elsmere*; the other, Julia, in her own right intelligent enough to earn a first-class degree in English from Somerville College, Oxford, married T.H. Huxley's second son Leonard. A photograph shows her engaging and keen, looking intensely at the camera, with haunting effect.

The family inheritance was concentrated remarkably in Leonard's children – extraordinarily, Aldous was only the third most successful of the brothers, in worldly terms at least. Julian (1887–1975) became an evolutionary biologist and humanist philosopher very much in the mould of T.H. (there is a famous photograph of him sitting on his grandfather's knee), although he was also a prominent promoter of the now-discredited 'science' of eugenics. This caused him some problems with both Catholics and communists when he became the first Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1946, and his six-year term was cut to two. He was a great populariser – in the 1930s he ran London Zoo, controversially increasing access for children – and became a well-known radio celebrity, appearing in programmes like *The Brains Trust*.

He was knighted in 1958. Yet even Julian pales next to his half-brother Sir Andrew Huxley (b.1917), winner of the 1963 Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine, member of the Order of Merit, Master of Trinity and President of the Royal Society (as was T.H.). Yet although Aldous thought fondly of his half-brother, they do not seem to have been particularly close (Sir Andrew has written that Aldous and Julian 'were more like uncles than brothers'[1]).

The Victorian Age saw the gradual decline of aristocracy, and of the sway of religion over the English – the theme of Matthew Arnold's stunning poem 'Dover Beach'. The loss of certainty brought about by Victorian ideas, including Darwinism and the Industrial Revolution, left a vacuum in the centre of public life. Arnold's brilliant *Culture and Anarchy* diagnosed the problem and prescribed a solution in terms of the protection of culture as the best that has been thought and said. Gradually, the landed gentry were replaced in public life by a group of meritocratic families whose nobility was self-consciously grounded in intellectual achievement and public-spirited responsibility. The Huxleys and the Arnolds were joined by the Wedgwoods/Darwins, the Macaulays, the Trevelyans and others who believed that their intelligence, knowledge and social standing gave them responsibilities for improving the lot of humankind in practical ways. These public values were formative for Aldous. His inheritance was a rich one, but it came with a lot of baggage.

Three tragedies, early successes and a family

Aldous Leonard Huxley was born on 26 July 1894, in lovely English countryside near Godalming in the county of Surrey, the third son of Leonard (b.1860) and Julia (b.1862). Julian was the eldest of their children, followed by Noel Trevenen (b.1891), always known as Trev, then Aldous, and finally his sister

Margaret (b.1899). The sprawling extended family was close; Aldous in particular was close in age, temperament and feeling to his cousin Gervas (b.1894), while other cousins such as Laurence (b.1890) and Joan Collier were frequent and welcome visitors.

Huxley's early childhood appears to have been idyllic and appreciated. The brothers were firm friends. Aldous adored his mother, who appears to have had a shining integrity, deep human sympathy and great authority. His father, an assistant master at Charterhouse, seems to have been a pleasant, limited man who communicated with the children at more or less their own level, fond of puns and japes, but nevertheless – or, given the rarefied environment, consequently – not really respected by the boys. Huxley's later writings are full of thinly disguised memories of endless summer days, sunshine, explorations and expeditions. He enjoyed collecting moths, playing conkers, rambles, picnics and, on their frequent holidays in Switzerland, climbing hills.

He was well-loved, bright and unusual, but not immediately academically distinguished. He was tall with a large head, which, when he was very young, he sometimes could not hold up, earning him the affectionate, if insensitive, nickname of 'Ogie', short for 'Ogre'. He spent long hours contemplating, in Julian's words, the strangeness of things.

In 1902, his mother realised an ambition of opening a girls' school, Prior's Field, near their home, initially with seven pupils – five day girls, one boarder (who brought her dog) and Aldous. The school, still going today, was an immediate success, even if its curriculum was tailored to Mrs Huxley's strengths (literature was a priority, with day trips to Shakespeare matinées – but a number of girls failed their Lower Certificates in mathematics). After that, at the age of nine, Aldous went to a prep school near Godalming where he was stoical in the face of bullying and bad food. He enjoyed acting – his Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* was apparently a show-stopper – and published his first poem, about sea horses, in the school magazine.

His upbringing could not have been better or happier. In 1908 he went to Eton, with his best friend Lewis Gielgud, the brother of Sir John, and was happily getting to know the place when the first of three devastating blows fell. His mother had been unwell, and in September, unbeknown to Aldous, cancer was diagnosed. Before the end of November she was dead. Huxley only discovered the horror when he was brought to see her for the last time; she was in pain, frustrated and angry at the cosmic injustice. The loss to the family – and the school – was profound. Worse, the happy family home was broken up. Julian was at Oxford, Trev and Margaret went to stay with Mrs Humphry Ward, joined on holidays by Aldous, and Leonard moved to Bayswater, where he lived alone.

Huxley's time at Eton was well spent; he enjoyed learning, had a quirky wit and did not waste his time on schoolboyish matters. He spent most of his time reading, yet was not unsporty; already over six feet four, he was bored by cricket but enjoyed the high jump. But in 1911 his academic career was halted abruptly; no one was initially worried by his swollen, red eyes, but he was soon almost completely blind, just about able to distinguish night from day. *Keratitis punctata* was diagnosed, a violent inflammation of the cornea, and in the days before penicillin and antibiotics there was little to be done.

Completing his education at Eton was now out of the question; his precious collection of now useless books was sent to his father's house. Aldous himself stayed sometimes with Mrs Ward, and sometimes with Gervas's father, his uncle Dr Henry Huxley. Gradually the condition subsided, but the inflammation had badly damaged the cornea. With extraordinary stoicism he adapted to his new situation, learning to read and write in Braille. The problem with Braille, he complained, was that one could not skip while reading tedious authors such as Macaulay – one had to read every single word; the advantage, as he told Gervas, was that one could read in bed at night without getting one's hands cold.

He also taught himself various piano pieces, painstakingly learning the right hand part, then the left hand part, and only then, having committed them to memory, playing the whole piece. Once a partial recovery had been made, he insisted on bicycling himself to the station, despite not being able to see where he was going (he would follow Gervas's mother). Most extraordinary of all, he wrote, on a typewriter, a novel of 80,000 words – substantially longer than this volume – which he never saw, and which is now lost. He never recovered more than partial sight; one eye was capable of perceiving light, while the other could make out shapes. He could read with the aid of a magnifying glass and drops of an atropine solution in his better eye that would keep the pupil dilated, enabling him to see around an opaque patch in his cornea.

In 1912 his father remarried, to a much younger woman called Rosalind Bruce (she was actually younger than Julian and Trev). The Huxley children were not close to their father and although Rosalind seems to have been generous and welcoming to them, they did not reciprocate. Aldous instead began to travel, and to try to regain his independence, first journeying alone in Germany, and then wintering with his uncle John Collier in Montana, where he somehow learned to ski. In 1913, he was able to begin to get ready for his Oxford Matriculation; he went to stay with his brother Trev, already ensconced as an undergraduate approaching his finals.

Trev was well-liked, extremely kind and unselfish, though sensitive and nervy. Nerviness was a Huxley trait: T.H. had been prone to depression, and Julian, now beginning an academic career in the US, suffered a nervous breakdown in 1913 which caused him to break with his fiancée of the time. Yet Trev felt things more keenly than even they. He and the rest of the family were deeply disappointed when he only got a second-class degree. Aldous began at Oxford in October 1913, while Trev sat for the civil service exam – once more underperforming.

By the summer of 1914, Trev had descended into depression, partly owing to poor results, partly through the weight of unfulfilled familial expectation, partly through overwork and overexercise, and partly through worry over Julian's breakdown. Little is known of the events of that summer, but he seems to have begun a relationship with a young housemaid. The strict social stratification of the time would have made such a relationship problematic, to say the least, for its participants; Trev suffered his own breakdown, and was confined to the same nursing home that had sheltered Julian the previous year. One Saturday, though he appeared cheerful, he never returned after a walk, and over a week later his body was found hanging from a tree.

Aldous's grief was deep; it pours out in letters he wrote at this time. In many of his later novels he worked through his feelings; many incidents allude to the three tragedies, characters are based on Julia and Trev, and the metaphors of light, darkness and blindness recur over and over again. Oxford provided him with few distractions; by the time he began his second year, he was virtually alone. Britain was at war, and his able-bodied friends had joined up. As hostilities commenced, Huxley's views as expressed in his letters were conventionally pro-war and anti-Boche, and he made several attempts to enlist, yet of course he never made it past a medical examination.

That is not to say that he struck an unimpressive figure. Extremely tall, he was very much the dandy and even something of a ladies' man. The future novelist L.P. Hartley, who briefly had rooms on the same staircase at Balliol before being called up, recalled that:

> I had never known anyone like Aldous. His voice, his rangy height, his elegant clothes, his noble white brow, crowned with a patch of unruly black hair, his mysterious rather glaucous eyes … peering through the oblong magnifying glass he used when he was reading – these left an ineffable impression. Culture had found a mortal envelope worthy of itself.[2]

Huxley did well at Oxford, entering prizes (winning only some of them), hating Anglo-Saxon and introducing himself to the finest French literature, including the first volumes of Proust's epic *Remembrance of Things Past*, all the while reading laboriously with his glass, and typing verse and short stories with a little portable on his knees. His fascination with mysticism began here, as he investigated William Blake and the German Lutheran Jacob Boehme from an impeccably twentieth-century sceptical standpoint. He was en route to a distinguished intellectual career, taking a first-class degree in English in 1916.

Yet the turning point in Huxley's early career came not via the university, but instead as a result of a social call, when a friend took him for a day out to Garsington Manor, near Oxford. The new owners Philip and Lady Ottoline Morrell curated a menagerie of interesting people, and it was thought, correctly, that the grandson of T.H. Huxley would be a fine addition. Philip was a Liberal MP, one of the few statesmen who had opposed the war with Germany (this would cost him his seat in 1918), but was comfortably off, having vast inherited wealth from the Morrell brewing interests familiar in and around Oxford.

Lady Ottoline (*née* Cavendish-Bentinck, from a highly aristocratic family) was a different kettle of fish altogether. Her marriage with Philip was open, and their joint interests in liberal politics, as well as liberality in both hospitality and sexuality, meant their coterie, containing the cream of Bloomsbury, was perhaps the most talented assembly since the great Parisian salons of the Enlightenment. Lady Ottoline's lovers included Bertrand Russell, Augustus John and Roger Fry, while at Garsington one might expect to see Herbert Asquith, John Maynard Keynes, Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Lytton Strachey, Katherine Mansfield, John Middleton Murry, Mark Gertler, Siegfried Sassoon, Dorothy Brett, Dora Carrington and T.S. Eliot. Lady Ottoline was 'arty beyond the dreams of avarice' in Huxley's words, affected, shy and religious, romantic, kind

and eccentric. She and Philip kept up their generosity even when they had run through their money, but their kindnesses were often repaid by mockery, gossip and backbiting (not least in some unkind fictionalisations by Aldous, but with greater maliciousness by Mansfield, Strachey, Carrington and Clive Bell).

Having graduated, Huxley was unsure what to do; as he wrote to Julian, the solution of the heiress had its attractions. That winter of 1915, Huxley was introduced to Lawrence and his larger-than-life German wife Frieda, and the latter's silvery tongue persuaded the reserved Aldous to sign up for one of the former's schemes to set up a colony of like-minded free-thinkers in Florida. Fortunately for all concerned, it fell through. Of the realistic solutions to his problem, he was torn between, and equally unenthusiastic about, journalism and teaching. Teaching in the end it was, with a term at Repton; he hated it. Meanwhile his poems and stories were beginning to appear, and by 1916 he had published enough to bring out his first volume of poetry, *The Burning Wheel*, a well-received collection with the characteristically Huxleian theme of hope confounded.

He continued to visit Garsington, and was by now thoroughly indoctrinated with the anti-war views de rigueur in that house. In lieu of war service, he volunteered for work on the land – mainly chopping trees at Garsington – alongside a number of conscientious objectors in the Morrells' sphere, such as Russell and Clive Bell. By a fortuitous set of coincidences, a young, penniless, rather gauche Belgian refugee, Maria Nys, came to stay. She was somewhat overwhelmed by the aristocratic sophistication and competitive intellectual fireworks. Indeed, she was very unhappy early in her stay, at one point attempting suicide. But Aldous wooed her patiently, finally proposing on the lawn at Garsington in the summer of 1916.

The engagement was hard; they had no money, and were often apart. They wrote to each other every day. Maria left Garsington and moved to London, but could barely support herself.

Aldous moved in with his father (who by now had left teaching to become editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*) in Hampstead. Eventually, Maria had to rejoin her mother and sisters sheltering from the war in Italy.

After an awful year, he got a post at Eton in autumn 1917 while his poetry was gaining an audience. His second small collection, *Jonah*, was published that year, followed by *The Defeat of Youth* in 1918, and during the school holidays he managed to get away and rejoin his rarefied social circle. The war finally ended in November, allowing Maria and her family to return to their father in Belgium, but even so Aldous did not have enough money to join her. Finally, in 1919 Middleton Murry offered him a job on the editorial staff of his literary journal *The Athenaeum*, and things were suddenly set fair. His father lent him money, he was able to resign from his teaching job, and he finally travelled to Belgium to see his fiancée for the first time in over two years. He found his prospective in-laws somewhat provincial, but they got on. Sadly, there was to be no inherited fortune. The Nys family, previously comfortably off, had been financially wiped out by the war.

Aldous and Maria married quietly in Belgium in July 1919, shortly before his twenty-fifth birthday; she was approaching twenty-one. She was small, especially compared to her giant of a husband, gamine, somewhat insecure; she was no intellectual, but had a practical streak (she not only tolerated, but even helped plan, his later *amours*,[3] and occasionally indulged herself with lovers as well). They settled down in a tiny flat in Hampstead, which Aldous decorated himself, and lived a life of genteel poverty, speaking French by choice together, English with friends. They had a daily maid but no cook, and managed for themselves with few frills – not even a sink or a cooker. Work was tolerable; Huxley wrote around two hundred reviews for *The Athenaeum*, as well as more articles elsewhere, and the poems kept coming too. He signed a contract for a book on Balzac, which, sadly, was never written.

Family matters dominated early 1920. His beloved Aunt Mary, Mrs Humphry Ward, died in March, while after a difficult pregnancy for Maria, their son Matthew was born on 19 April. Aldous's fourth, and perhaps best, collection of poetry, *Leda*, appeared in May. But in literary terms the most significant event had already occurred in January, with his first book of prose – six short stories and a little play, collectively entitled *Limbo*.