

Book Reviews

Cynthia Carson Bisbee, Paul Bisbee, Erika Dyck, Patrick Farrell, James Sexton and James W. Spisak (eds), *Psychedelic Prophets: The Letters of Aldous Huxley and Humphry Osmond* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), pp. lxxix + 644, \$75.00 CAD, hardback, ISBN: 9780773555068.

In the spring of 1953, literary giant Aldous Huxley, ensconced in the Hollywood Hills, wrote to psychiatrist Humphry Osmond, clinical director of the Weyburn Mental Hospital in Saskatchewan. Huxley was intrigued by a publication that Osmond put out with a colleague on experiments with mescaline, a hallucinogenic substance that occurs naturally in the peyote cactus. Ten years Huxley's junior, Osmond stayed at Huxley's home when he travelled to California in May 1953 for the meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in Los Angeles. Huxley and his wife Maria extended warmth and hospitality, Huxley joined Osmond at several APA sessions, and Osmond led Huxley and Maria through their first mescaline experience. With this visit, the two men entered each other's worlds, and began an eleven-year correspondence that only ended with Huxley's death in 1963. *Psychedelic Prophets* contains the complete set of letters between the two men and is a portrait of the friendship that blossomed from this first contact. It is also a window onto the history of mental health and psychiatry in twentieth-century America, and a corrective to our general understanding of the place of hallucinogens in American science, medicine and culture.

The book begins with an extended introduction – nearly eighty pages in length – that works beautifully to situate the correspondence between these two brilliant thinkers. The letters are then organised into eleven chapters by year. They begin with the first tantalising exchanges leading up to Huxley's and Osmond's May 1953 visit, and end with letters from fall 1963, just a few weeks before Huxley's death. The editors include helpful annotations throughout the correspondence that contextualise references to figures (both contemporary and philosophical) as well as concepts, historical events and other activities by Osmond and Huxley. An Epilogue reflects on the fate of LSD and hallucinogens in American culture beyond the 1960s. Four appendices enrich our understanding of the relationship between Huxley and Osmond, one of which includes a remarkably moving account of Maria's last days, penned by Huxley.

These are rich, newsy letters that capture much of Huxley's and Osmond's passion for shared ideas and values, and the personal affection that defined their friendship. Huxley and Osmond exchanged news about their children and the polarised climates of southern California and the Canadian prairies. The letters are even more valuable for what they tell us about the world in which Huxley and Osmond lived and their perceptions of it. Post-World War II America was an age of machines, unbridled technological optimism, rampant individualism and Cold War military science. It was also an age when American psychiatry came into its own, benefitting from the new patient populations that emerged after World War II. This psychiatry was steeped in the work of Freud and Adolf Meyer and was defined by a lingering custodial asylum culture and problematic attitudes both inside and outside the profession towards the mentally ill.

Huxley and Osmond went against the grain of this world in several ways. They rejected both the dominance of Freud's 'new religion' and Adolf Meyer's 'holism' in American

psychiatry, and at the same time took extra sensory perception (ESP) and parapsychology seriously. They were sharp critics of the grim reality of asylum care and the segregation of patients. Fundamentally, they were both humanists. They understood the world around them from a broad perspective that transcended the divides between science, medicine, philosophy and spirituality. Reacting strongly against the post-World War II machine age, they aligned themselves with Norbert Wiener's eventual criticism of the unchecked enthusiasm for military science. As Osmond wrote to Huxley, Wiener recognised that 'we must expand the psyche or become slaves of the machine' (p. 185).

How can we expand the psyche? At the heart of Huxley's and Osmond's shared humanistic perspective was the potential of hallucinogens for expanding consciousness and for creating more empathetic practices in psychiatry. They followed Jung, who wrote in 1907 that 'paranoid ideas and hallucinations contain a germ of meaning' (Carl Jung and Aniela Jaffé, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 1963, p. 127). Experimenting with LSD – whether self-experimentation or on laboratory animals – showed promise on many levels, so much so that Osmond coined the term 'psychedelic' in a letter to Huxley in 1956 to capture the effects of hallucinogens on the mind. Medically, hallucinogens could help generate compassion and empathy towards the mentally ill on the part of the clinician. For example, Osmond attempted to understand schizophrenic states biochemically but also felt that hallucinogen research could help us make sense of such states. From a philosophical perspective, hallucinogens could also expand our conceptions of consciousness and the mind. Spiritually, for Huxley in particular, hallucinogens could help us access the soul and make the process of dying easier – he took LSD on his deathbed as a way of alleviating fears during this transition.

The book's editors reflect the broad relevance of this collection for historians and scholars of Huxley, as well as the meticulous work that went into contextualising the letters. Psychologists Cynthia Carson Bisbee and Paul Bisbee worked with Osmond for decades at the Bryce Hospital (formerly the Alabama Insane Hospital) in Tuscaloosa, when Osmond was professor at the University of Alabama. Historian Erika Dyck has published extensively on the history of psychiatry in Canada, particularly on the history of hallucinogens. Patrick Farrell is an editor and historian of science. Both James Sexton and James W. Spisak are experts on Huxley and his papers.

This book will be of immense value to historians of medicine and psychiatry, psychiatrists and cultural historians, as well as Huxley scholars and those interested in the many connections between science, medicine and culture in twentieth-century America. More than anything else, the book highlights the value both Huxley and Osmond placed on empathy in the face of Cold War political tensions and the mechanisation of the world. Why call them psychedelic prophets? The editors argue that LSD's reputation was damaged by the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s as hallucinogens, thanks to figures like Timothy Leary, became tools of the counterculture. The book aims to help us reconfigure this cultural legacy and create a more accurate picture of the wider history of the intersection between hallucinogens and American science. In this it succeeds. Indeed, there has been resurgence of respect for hallucinogens and their potential for psychiatric research, including new experiments on the effects of hallucinogens for treating depression and PTSD. More broadly, the Huxley–Osmond letters and their critiques of contemporary psychiatry enrich our understanding of this chapter in American medicine and culture.

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