

Writing a Family History of Evolution



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Thomas Henry Huxley with his grandson Julian Huxley, 1887



Julian Huxley with a portrait of his grandfather, T. H. Huxley, shot for Life magazine, 1947

An Intimate History of Evolution (Allen Lane, 2022) is a history of evolutionary ideas told through one family, the Huxleys. It is, at core, a double biography of Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's nineteenth century "bulldog" and his grandson, Julian Huxley. I will discuss how I consider them "one very long-lived man", with vital dates 1825-1975. Yet this book really works through four generations of Huxleys, to tell the story of how conceptions of nature and culture changed over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, through anthropology, biology, ethnography, ethology, primatology, population genetics and more. The Huxleys – great synthesisers and science communicators – were at the beginning of each of these disciplines of life. Tracking generations, genealogies, genetics and eugenics, I will show how a core idea anchored the whole: birth and death is the business of family histories as it is the business of evolution by natural selection.

This book talk will explore how I managed their intimate and public histories, and drew from the Huxleys' own open disclosures regarding their family life. Generations of Huxleys were bedevilled by paralysing mental illness. Yet at the same time, inheritance across generations was their intellectual business too, and they were fascinated by it. This was a literary and a scientific family, including, not least Aldous Huxley. Through them all, I have tracked for a general readership a long modern story of secularisation and its scientific discontents.



Alison Bashford FBA FAHA is Scientia Professor of History at the University of New South Wales. Previously she was Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History, University of Cambridge. She is Director of the Laureate Centre for History & Population as well as the New Earth Histories Research Program at UNSW.

Her latest co-edited book is *New Earth Histories: Geocosmologies and the making of the modern world* (University of Chicago Press, 2023) and *An Intimate History of Evolution: The Story of the Huxley Family* was published by Allen Lane in November 2022. Her current book project is "The Strange History of the Hand: Physiognomy, Palmistry, Phenotype."

BIOGRAPHY WORKSHOP SERIES 2023

Biography Workshop National
Centre of Biography (ANU)

Time:

Thursday 24 Aug 2023
11:00am-12.30pm

In Person:

Seminar Room 2.56
Level 2 RSSS Building
146 Ellery Crescent

Zoom option:

Meeting ID:
84900589945

Password: 630803

Join Zoom Meeting:
bit.ly/BioWorkshop2022