Desmondism

John Sutherland begins his review of Adrian Desmond’s *Huxley* (LRB, 23 March) by claiming that Huxley is a hard subject for a biography, working as he did on squishy animals with long names that are not even in the *OED*. In fact, the story of Huxley’s life—apothecary’s assistant in the London slums, assistant Naval surgeon in the Pacific, and then an unemployed and grantless young scientist, eventually fighting, biting and backbiting his way to the very top to become president of such societies as the Royal, Ethnological, Geological, Palaeontological and the British Association, as well as university president, dean, Privy Councillor and major figure in educational reform—would thrill anyone interested in the history of science. Indeed, there have been five full-length biographies of Huxley since 1960.

But aside from the Horatian Alger aspect of the story, Sutherland misses Huxley’s importance in the transfer of power in Victorian science from the clergyman-naturalists of Oxbridge to the new professional scientists, and his role in establishing the institutions of this new organisation of science such as the journal *Nature* and, eventually, the Imperial College of Science. When Desmond says, ‘with Huxley the scientist is born,’ he very well knows that the term is William Whewell’s much earlier one. He is saying that Huxley represents the beginning of the era of the professional scientist who earns a salary for his research, and not as a fellow of some religious foundation like the Oxbridge colleges, not as a physician or clergyman, doing science on the side, and not as a Darwin, rich enough not to have to work at all. Similarly, Sutherland fails to see the insights into Victorian and contemporary science provided by the accounts of how Huxley and his buddies got together, first in the Red Lion dining-club and then in the X-Club, to conspire, fix elections, dispense honours, take over organisations and set new standards for science teaching and examination.
Sutherland claims that Huxley and Darwin had 'intellectual differences' which are 'not easy to disentangle'. In fact, the basic differences were very simple: Huxley, like most of his contemporaries (except Wallace), never really accepted Darwin's concept of natural selection, and unlike Darwin, tended to see evolution as progressive, not as an irregularly and randomly branching tree. Sutherland claims that Desmond's quotes are 'often unfootnoted': perhaps he missed the (admittedly annoying) technique used by Desmond here and in previous books: putting superscript numbers every paragraph or so, he then piles up a list of corresponding references in the endnotes.

Sutherland might use his OED to look up 'historiography' and see it has nothing to do with 'smuggling in science'. Desmond is simply promising to avoid detailed accounts of all the many relevant controversies among historiographers and set new standards for science teaching and examination.
ians of science working on Victorian biology. In fact, many of them can be dug out of his notes. The book does seem to end in midstream: Desmond’s reason for stopping in the middle is probably that he is planning a second volume. His failure to point this out is a weakness, as are his accounts of some of the biology and the controversies in which Huxley was involved.

Although Huxley was an abolitionist and, for example, helped lead a campaign against abuses of black workers in Jamaica, he, like Darwin and most of his scientist contemporaries (but not Wallace), was certainly a racist. However, to lay genocide at his feet is going a bit far. There are many much better candidates among the psychologists and biologists of our century.

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