

Puritan Pervert

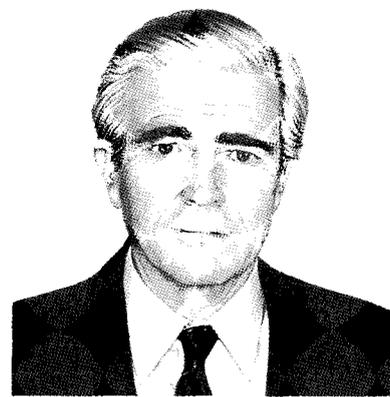
Pervert. Although the word has been drummed out of polite conversation in recent years, *pervert* comes inevitably to mind when discussing Alfred C. Kinsey, the sex statistician and subject of Bill Condon's new film, *Kinsey*. *Pervert* perfectly applies to the man who spent his life trying to erase this word from our vocabulary. Etymologically, it comes from the Latin *per* (thoroughly) and *vert* (turn). To be perverted, then, means to turn or be turned thoroughly away from the normal. This was Kinsey, a man who turned away from the normal in sexual relations and succeeded in turning his wife, his colleagues, and, eventually, a significant portion of America with him. He did so by claiming to demonstrate that there was no basis for classifying any sexual activity as abnormal, including but hardly limited to wife-sharing, hetero and homo group sex, voyeurism, sadomasochism, pedophilia, and—one of his own favorite pastimes—masturbating by means of urethral insertion, preferably using a toothbrush, bristle-end first.

Initially, Kinsey's turning was not something he freely chose. It was forced upon him by his unusually contentious upbringing. Whatever else he was, Kinsey was an exceptionally strong-willed individual, so it is not surprising that, as a boy, he would clash with his father, a blinkered, 19th-century puritan whose entire life seems to have been a search-and-destroy mission waged against pleasure of all kinds, especially sexual. It was inevitable that Kinsey should rebel against his father's warped moralism. Unfortunately, as can happen with strong personalities, his rebellion went too far. From a perverted, humorless Christianity, he vaulted into a perverted, humorless behaviorism.

In Condon's biopic, we first meet the future sex statistician as a young boy. It is 1908, and he is listening to his father, Alfred Seguire (John Lithgow), harangue his Methodist congregation on the evils of the modern technologies that facilitate lust: cars, movies, and . . . zippers. Zippers? Yes, they afford "speedy access to moral oblivion," fulminates Kinsey Senior. He fairly seethes with what we have been strenuously taught to recog-

nize as an imperfectly repressed libido. His stifled urges have curdled into a miserable, raging prudery. Not long after this scene, we see Alfred C. 30 years later. He stands before an amphitheater, his face flushed red as he hectors 100 or so hormonally addled college students. It is not zipper speed that has him exercised, however. He is inveighing against the "scandalous delay in [American] sexual activity." The tone of impassioned righteousness that resonates through the oratory of both father and son says it all. Junior may think he has thrown off Papa's orthodoxy, but he has merely swapped it for another zealotry that is just as bullying in its own way and frequently a good deal more harmful. Later in the film, Alfred C.'s own son rebels against his father's penchant for discussing genitalia with his daughters at mealtime. Having heard quite enough about labia and vulvas, the young man declares such talk is not normal at dinner. As he stalks from the room, he angrily informs his father, "My friends' parents think you're a menace." Unfortunately, we never hear from this perceptive young man again.

This juxtaposition of puritanisms is the best part of Condon's otherwise dishonest film. Elsewhere, he pretends to give us Kinsey, warts and all; in fact, he has carefully sanitized his subject preparatory to canonizing him. The real Kinsey was not at all like the film's. Playing Kinsey, Liam Neeson has been directed to make the statistician seem a tormented but large-souled man dedicated to a scientifically disinterested inquiry into the facts of sexual activity in America. Not so, his sympathetic biographers reveal. In *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Life*, James H. Jones judges Kinsey to have been a clever manipulator who masterfully disguised his real intentions from both authorities and associates. "The man I came to know," Jones writes, "bore no resemblance to the canonical Kinsey." He was "a crypto-reformer who spent his every waking hour attempting to change the sexual mores of the United States." In *Sex: The Measure of All Things: A Life of Alfred C. Kinsey*, Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy reports that Kinsey confided to one of his colleagues that "the most basic force behind his re-



Kinsey

Produced by American Zoetrope
Written and directed by Bill Condon
Distributed by Fox Searchlight Pictures

search was deeply personal." So much for disinterested inquiry.

Entomologist-turned-sexologist, Kinsey made a point of referring to his own species under the rubric of "the human animal." After a career studying the habits of gall wasps and cataloging nearly 500,000 specimens, he tired of the critter and changed course. He became determined to apply his scientific methods to Americans—you and me and our children. As warrant for doing so, he reasoned that "human beings are just larger, more complicated gall wasps" and assembled a staff at Indiana University to take the "sex histories" of thousands of men and women. The ever-progressive Rockefeller Foundation found his early results so promising that they decided to support his efforts lavishly. In 1948, Kinsey published his research in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, followed five years later by *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. The Kinsey Reports, as they came to be known, claimed their statistics demonstrated that 90 percent of American males and over 60 percent of females engaged, with varying degrees of frequency, in some kind of abnormal or illicit sex, officially defined. It followed, he told his supporters at Indiana and the Rockefeller Foundation but not the public at large, that, to cleanse society of sexual aberration, you would have to arrest just about everyone in the nation. "When it's everybody's sin, it's nobody's sin," he sardonically quipped.

Seeming to authorize erotic indulgence, Kinsey's books became best-sell-

ers, an almost unprecedented phenomenon for putatively scholarly works. *Time* put Kinsey on its cover, noting that this mild-mannered Methodist from New Jersey was an “almost monotonously normal human being,” a dedicated family man and hardworking scientist whose painstaking research promised to liberate average Americans from the puritan prison of sexual ignorance. Following *Time*’s lead, the rest of the media joined in hailing him a new savior. The young Hugh Hefner (who, like Kinsey, came from an overbearing Methodist background) wrote an ecstatic article on Kinsey’s research for his college newspaper and, shortly after graduating, felt himself licensed to launch *Playboy*, enriching himself enormously by spreading the gospel of Kinsey-style sexual liberation to the immeasurable pleasure of adolescent men around the world.

And gospel it was. Kinsey had a reformer’s zeal, and, like most reformers, his motives were profoundly self-interested. He was seeking a new dispensation in order to accommodate his own peculiar proclivities. This is what stood behind his insistence that judgmental words, such as *normal*, *abnormal*, and *perversion*, have no relevance when discussing sex. To prove this, he deep-fried his evidence. For instance, he claimed his statistics demonstrated that homosexuals make up 10 percent of the population and, further, that 37 percent of all men had at least one homosexual experience ending in orgasm. To this day, these statistics are accepted as fact by many who are unaware that, of the 5,300 men Kinsey interviewed, 1,400 were doing time in prison, and many of them were sex offenders. What’s more, when interviewing homosexuals in less-restricted walks of life, he encouraged them to recruit their homosexual friends to participate in his project. Then, there is the matter of self-selecting volunteers. Even today, in the age of sexual bravado, most people are chary of revealing their intimate lives to strangers. Who, then, was agreeing to submit to these interviews in the buttoned-up 40’s? It was, after all, a time when news of an irregular sex life could cost a person his job. Kinsey’s interviewees were perforce a special group. Most were more than ordinarily preoccupied with sex and, therefore, more given to experiment. All this never appeared in the report and is barely mentioned in the film, and then only by one of Kinsey’s academic competitors, a pompous, jealous prig.

The reason Kinsey dwelt on homosexuality was that he was a bisexual whose switch-hitting predilections seem to have been more homo than hetero. There is also a good deal of evidence that he may have preferred voyeurism and onanism even more. His devotion to various wanking techniques included autoerotic asphyxia. For a real treat, he would hang himself from the rafters by a rope tied round his scrotum until he passed out. Then, there is the research that he recorded on film in his attic of his male staff sharing their wives, including his own. No wonder he so fiercely insisted that there are no normative boundaries to sexual expression.

Sadly, Kinsey felt compelled to study child sexuality, too. To conduct this research, he contacted several pedophiles and took their sex histories. His two principle sources were Rex King, a sexual omnivore if we are to believe his story, and former Nazi Fritz von Balluseck, whose career met an untimely end in 1956 when he was tried for the rape and murder of a ten-year-old girl. King, who claimed to have had relations with over 9,000 partners of both sexes, human and animal, was especially interested in boys and had molested children as young as two months. Kinsey not only took these gentlemen’s histories but maintained contact with them afterward, warmly thanking them for their help and inviting them to send more information on their exploits when they could. It never occurred to him to report them to authorities. To King, he wrote: “I rejoice at everything you send, for I am then assured that that much more of your material is saved for scientific publication.” How can this be read but as an encouragement to molest more children in the cause of science? As for Von Balluseck, the judge who tried him in Germany wrote the following regarding the miscreant’s diaries:

With cynicism and passion, he recorded his crimes against 100 children in the smallest detail. He sent the detail of his experiences regularly to the U.S. sex researcher, Kinsey. The latter was very interested and kept up a regular and lively correspondence with Von Balluseck.

Condon muffles these disquieting facts. He includes a brief scene in which a visibly dismayed Kinsey interviews King, making it seem a one-time contact. Need-

less to say, the former Nazi is kept entirely out of camera range.

Condon and his enthusiastic cast have labored to make Kinsey seem a humane man of science. He was not. He spoke of human beings as animals encoded with but one purpose: to reach orgasm as frequently as possible. Love, friendship, children, and family simply do not enter the picture. His was the male dream in its most insane form: sexual gratification with neither context nor responsibility. Kinsey seems never to have considered that the sex drive of the “human animal” is designed to foster procreation. This is why his fraudulent research has been so instrumental in visiting sexual chaos on America. Whenever sex is promoted from a means to an end in itself, havoc is likely to ensue. The wild increase in pornography, prostitution, disease, broken homes, abortions, and throwaway children can all be traced to the kind of demand Kinsey and others of his ilk have imposed upon the unwitting: Desire, however wayward, must be satisfied before all other considerations. A puritan to the end, Kinsey was grimly determined to transform his perversions into moral duties.

It might be worth mentioning something else that Condon left out of his film. While Kinsey and his crew of graduate students were stalking the perfect orgasm, America was at war with two totalitarian regimes that threatened to harness human energy to less pleasurable pursuits. Kinsey and his staff seem to have been content to leave this matter to the unenlightened.

The Kinsey Institute still flourishes on the campus of Indiana University, disseminating views that continue to be taken seriously by government officials and civic groups, including the North American Man/Boy Love Association. By the way, the Institute’s website currently features news of Condon’s film. They obviously think that it is a swell way to promote themselves.



Night Vision

"I hear thunder," Ivalene said in a puzzled voice, looking up to the blue sky stretched tight across the great canyon.

"How could there be thunder?" Will Ford demanded. "There isn't a cloud in sight. They must be blasting somewhere close by to here."

"So how could they be blasting, smart-ass?" she retorted. "Blasting isn't allowed in, like, national parks—you know?"

The low rumble sounded again almost under their feet, and Will Ford, looking at his boots, saw the head of the thunder cloud eight hundred feet down, flashing like a lightbulb between the walls of the side canyon. "Well I'll be danged," he said. "Look at that, would you? A guy comes all the way out here to the Grand Canyon for a little R and R, and it sounds just exactly like Baghdad on a slow day."

"How could *anyone* possibly compare the two?" Ivalene retorted. "Thunder is the voice of Gaia, Will—the goddess of nature, goodness, and peace."

Will Ford was about to answer her when he thought better of it. Brains, after all, weren't the reason he kept Ivalene around to begin with. Even so, it wasn't always easy having a tree-hugger for a girlfriend. "Maybe you better get dinner started now, before that thing moves on up here and soaks us," he suggested.

He had the fire already lit, and an armload of dead pine branches piled beside it; nothing left for him to do but prepare the thick beefsteak he'd bought from a butcher shop in Circleville, Utah, on the trip south from Salt Lake City. The rest of the meal was the girl's responsibility. Will poured a couple of fingers of single-malt whiskey into a plastic cup and went on to the Jeep, where he pulled a nylon bag from the back and sat up on the front seat to open it.

The bag lay heavily on his lap, a hard, concentrated weight. He unzipped it and drew out a piece of complicated-looking equipment painted black except for the glassy eye pieces. It was night-vision gear, but unlike the standard issue model—unlike, in fact, any night vision Will had seen in his Army career. He had bought it for seven dollars and fifty cents, American money, in a pawn shop in the Sadr City neighborhood of Baghdad. The pawn-

broker, a bearded, turbaned man with a gold tooth and an eye that kept drifting up under its drooping lid, said the customer who had left it with him claimed it to be brand-new, state-of-the-art equipment, still in the experimental stage in the U.S.A. Having smuggled his purchase into the barracks in a duffel bag and hidden it among his other gear, Will had tested the system just once. The result had been profoundly disturbing—so much so that he had laid the thing away and not tried it again until, stateside at last, he had made further experiments at home in Salt Lake City.

Now he sat regarding the apparatus with an unease amounting to dread. Ashamed, Will replaced the night vision in its bag and wandered over to the cliff edge for a look at the thunderstorm. Though he'd been half expecting to find it crouched just below the canyon rim, waiting to leap up over and pounce upon the camp, the storm had vanished without a trace, except for a wet shine on the boulders far below and the acid smell of baked rock cooling.

"Storm's gone away," he reported cheerfully to Ivalene on his return to camp. "How's dinner coming along, Baby?"

"It's doing fine. I'll be ready for you to do your steak thing in just a few minutes now."

"Good. There's time for another whiskey, then. Sure you won't have a drink—just a *little* one—with me, to stay warm? It's getting downright chilly out here."

"I don't need chemicals in my body to keep me warm. And every outdoorsperson knows that alcohol does the opposite, by thinning the blood and reducing the flow to the extremities."

Will Ford thought: *Next she's going to tell me that contraceptive foams are chemicals and that sex, by withdrawing the flow of blood from the head to the loins, makes you stupid.*

The evening sun hung red above the western land line, burning along the undersides of the clouds and flooding the upper half of the canyon maze with a crimson brilliance that lay squarely upon the blue, purple, and black shadows below, without mixing with them. Will sat at a safe distance from the cliff edge



to watch the sunset, while he finished his second drink. He was not a man to enjoy, or even to notice, scenery. The Grand Canyon, however, was unignorable: something beyond scenery, like the background of a movie transformed by camera tricks and special effects. Without waiting for sunset to be over, he tossed the empty cup over the cliff, before he could think what Ivalene would have had to say about that, and walked briskly on toward the fire. "If anyone had ever told me I was going to fall for a guy who ate dead cow," Ivalene marveled as she watched him lift the great marbled steak from its waxed-paper wrapper and place it, sizzling, across the carboned grill laid above the flames, "I'd have told them I was more likely to get involved with a lumberjack than that."

Will nodded to show he'd heard, but he did not answer her. The words "fall for" set off an alarm bell in his mind. They weren't the kind he was comfortable hearing any woman, let alone Ivalene, use.

It was dark on the North Rim when they finished supper. Ivalene cleaned up and gave the steak bone to Will with instructions to bury it at a distance from camp. He threw it into the canyon instead and made a detour round the lighted tent where Ivalene was inside taking care of girl things, on his way to the Jeep and the bottle of whiskey he'd left on the front seat, together with the nylon bag.

In the dim car light, the night-vision equipment looked especially sinister. Will Ford felt an impulse to hurl the contraption over the cliff after the steak bone and the cup, but he resisted it. There was a mystery here, he understood—rather, the key to a mystery—that he could not ignore or run away from. In Iraq, he had been decorated twice for bravery in action. Here, on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, there was no one to