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Brave new Huxley

by [Ellie Thermanen](#)

On *Selected Letters* by Aldous Huxley.

James Sexton, editor

The Selected Letters of Aldous Huxley.

Ivan R. Dee, 497 pages, \$35

These letters trace what the editor James Sexton describes as Huxley's "gradual transformation from witty jester to determined seeker of peace, both for himself and for mankind." This generous sampling of over a thousand letters (about a tenth of Huxley's output) opens with a note that Huxley sent at the age of seven to his brother Julian: "Thank you very much for the cyclopedia. I now know everything, from who invented dice to the normal temperature of the sea cucumber." Huxley's intellectual voracity, no less than his intellectual eclecticism, was already in evidence.

In early adolescence, Huxley was rendered nearly blind by a vicious bout of corneal keratitis; the affliction may have saved his life, since he was refused entry into Britain's armed services during World War I. He remained on Oxford's almost totally abandoned campus, and near the end of his time at the university was introduced to the famous bluestocking Lady Ottoline Morrell.

Morrell, a descendent of Bess of Hardwick, had a wide range of familial connections to Britain's aristocracy and was well-known for her generous patronage of British artists and intellectuals. Huxley's post-Oxford development may be credited largely to his residence at Garsington Manor, Lady Ottoline's haven for her pet projects. Within weeks of his introduction to Morrell, Huxley had established himself as a Garsington regular.

Despite Lady Ottoline's generosity, Huxley burned his bridges when he published *Crome Yellow*, a thinly veiled description of Garsington's characters and goings-on. Huxley's less-than-sincere apology in 1921 managed effectively to end the relationship:

Your letter bewildered me. I cannot understand how anyone could suppose that this little marionette performance of mine was the picture of a real milieu: it so obviously isn't. . . . My error, I admit, was to use some of Garsington's architectural details. I ought to have laid the scene in China—nobody could have had any doubt then that it was a marionette show.

For Huxley, the loss of Garsington and his former patroness was offset by the friendships he made there with D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Dora Carrington, and a young Belgian refugee named Maria Nys, whom Huxley later married.

The Huxleys' unconventional marriage reflected the social and intellectual adventurousness that had characterized the couple's time at Garsington. All but a few letters between Huxley and Maria were lost in the 1961 fire that destroyed nearly all of Huxley's possessions. The chief sources of our knowledge about Huxley's unorthodox married life are his letters to friends, his brother Julian, and most significantly to Mary Hutchinson, who became his and Maria's lover.

Huxley met Hutchinson early in 1922. She was a prominent socialite, the mistress of Clive Bell, and like Aldous and Maria partook fully of what John Maynard Keynes later called the "immoralism" of the Bloomsbury set. The trio produced a formidable collection of letters documenting the course of their three-sided relationship that was only recently made public.

The letters Aldous and Maria sent to Mary during their extensive travels in Western Europe and Southeast Asia over the course of the late 1920s reflect the couple's extraordinary wealth of cultural and historical knowledge. We see Huxley's full range: husband, traveler, lover, aesthete, and scathing social commentator.

If you were here, Mary—I wish you were—you would agree that Delhi, not Paris, is the place where Proust should have lived. All the prides, snobberies and deceptions, all the humiliations and social agonies, all the masks and courtesies of Paris are here, but magnified, exaggerated and complicated... . The only thing that is lacking is the intellectual element. There is no culture in Delhi; the comedy of artistic snobberies and intellectual pretensions is unknown... . One could spend a long time botanizing here.

In the early 1930s, Huxley's interests turned from "botanizing" inward, toward a perspective on modern society based on substance, not superficiality. He began working on "a novel about the Future—Wells's Utopia realized, and the absolute horror of it, a revolt against it," which became *Brave New World*.

Huxley's prescient dystopian novel marked the nascence of a brave new Huxley: the admonitory fantasist and LSD enthusiast emerged over the 1940s and 1950s. If his formative years had been characterized by physical excess, his later time was devoted almost exclusively to spiritual pursuits. This older Huxley found himself revolted by fascism and what he perceived as the enormous threats of coercive politics, eugenics, and the mechanization and depersonalization of society.

Letters to his literary contemporaries, friends, and family members reveal the development of an ardent commitment to pacifism as a personal and political philosophy. In a letter to Mary Hutchinson in 1942, Huxley writes:

Meanwhile, one writes and does what infinitesimally little one can to help alleviating the misery of the world. Of books I don't read much outside the field of mystical religion, which is what now interests me beyond anything else and in which, I believe, lies the sole hope of the world. For obviously the world isn't going to be preserved from future wars by the seven-ocean navies and five-continent air forces, of which there is talk here, but only by some sort of common belief, the holding of which makes people reluctant to embark on these enormous suicides.

His letters from this time forward make it clear that Aldous and Maria's move to Hollywood in the 1940s marked the second critical turning point for Huxley. He wrote prolifically, and the novels, essays, and letters to family and friends reveal a man who had left the sarcasm and cynicism of his youth well behind. The letters are serious, straightforward; at times, they are marked by an extraordinarily moving spirituality:

If we open ourselves up to the divine Life Force in its physical and spiritual manifestations we are all right, as individuals and as societies of individuals. If, on the

contrary, we turn our backs on the God-made universe and insist on living in the home-made, verbal universe of fancies and ideals, imagining that we can improve on nature and make God in our own image, then we ruin our private lives, physically and spiritually, and create societies such as we live in today. Our habit of doing most of our living in a home-made world of words, fancies and illusions is so deeply ingrained that it requires hard work with special techniques to “get back to where we have always been”—that is to say, to the given reality of Nature and Grace, to things as they really are, in themselves, not *quoad nos*, in relation to our egos.

Sexton’s collection, though entertaining and informative, suffers from some arbitrary editorial choices. Introductions are randomly randomly inserted; some recipients of Huxley’s missives receive biographical notes at the points of their first appearances while others do not. At a few points, the reader is left to flip confusedly through earlier pages or resort to outside reference for context and chronology.

Nevertheless, Sexton has done an invaluable service in compiling and publishing these letters, particularly the previously unreleased letters. They provide a window into the life of one of the twentieth-century’s most prolific literary intellectuals.

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