

A Life Revisited

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JBS: The Life and Work of JBS Haldane

Ronald W Clark

First published in 1968

by Coward-McCann Inc., New York

The true test of a work of literature is its longevity, whether it shall be read with profit by future generations. The novelist and science writer, Arthur Koestler, liked to say that he would gladly exchange a hundred readers today for ten readers in ten years time, or one reader a hundred years later. By this token Ronald Clark's life of JBS Haldane succeeds splendidly. It is an absorbing study of an engaging character, as fresh and vivid now as it must have been when first published thirty years ago.

But then the subject of this biography was no ordinary scientist. He was a great experimentalist but also a high class mathematician, arguably one of the half-dozen best biologists of this century and unquestionably the most versatile. Nor were his interests restricted to what we conventionally demarcate as 'science'. He was learned in the classics, steeped in history and philosophy, a political activist who wrote a weekly column for a working – class newspaper. His career was suitably varied as well. He took part in both World Wars and was severely wounded in the first, acquiring a reputation as 'the bravest and dirtiest officer in [the British] army'. He

taught and researched for a decade apiece in the three acknowledged centres of British academe – Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of London. He was a wonderfully accomplished writer, a master equally of the scientific paper and the polemical pamphlet. In his science, and more so in his politics, he was greatly controversial. He revelled in being contrary, a scion of the British upper classes who became an admirer of Stalin and a member of the Communist Party. It can safely be said that no other scientist of comparable stature had a life half as colourful as JBS Haldane's.

Ronald Clark's life does justice to the many aspects of the man. It is based on a massive stack of documentary evidence, and draws also on interviews conducted with Haldane's friends and co-workers. The tone is affectionate but not uncritical. His lapses in judgement are not glossed over, such as his unconscionable delay in coming out against Stalin's pet biologist, Trofim Lysenko, whose belief that acquired characteristics could be inherited flew in the face of established evidence in genetics, some of it provided by Haldane himself.

Haldane once remarked that 'the key to India was snobbery. The Hindu caste system is the greatest glorification of snobbery that the world has ever known'. He was himself born to arrogance, of both the social and intellectual kind. His father, J S Haldane, was a Scottish aristocrat but also a pioneering physiologist famous for his experiments on himself. With his father's example before him JBS could not

help becoming a scientist. He started early; when he was cut on his forehead at the age of four, he wiped the blood onto his fingers and asked, 'is it oxyhaemoglobin or carboxyhaemoglobin?' The son likewise became a courageous practitioner of self-experimentation, administering chemicals to his blood and locking himself up in chambers to find out more about the limits to breathing. This was his form of *tapas*, intended to achieve "knowledge not obtainable by other means". Haldane was restless as both scientist and human being, moving on quickly from one field of research, or one job, to another. Clark observes of his subject that "his roots were short" – he found it easier than most men to pull them up. But even by his own standards the decision to move to India in 1957 was quite unprecedented. He was now past sixty, the age at which Englishmen retire to cultivate their gardens. Why then did he choose to move from the prosperous First World to the poor and odorous Third World? Haldane sometimes said it was a political statement, a reaction to the Anglo-French invasion of the Suez Canal in 1956. Nehru's India, he claimed, was more democratic and more tolerant than the West. At other times he gave a facetious explanation: "One of my reasons for settling in India was to avoid wearing socks. Sixty years in socks is enough". Clark's narrative suggests a third possibility, that the biologist in Haldane was attracted by the diversity of plant and animal life in the tropics.

Haldane's years in India, needless to say, were rich in colour and controversy. He

became a vegetarian, wore the dhoti (and no socks!), and acquired a decent knowledge of Sanskrit. He taught at the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta, before quarrelling with its Director, Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis. With a group of devoted students he then moved to Orissa to start a laboratory. He edited the authoritative *Journal of Genetics*, and continued to publish scientific papers himself. Most striking though were a series of semi-popular essays on the prospects for a non-violent biology, a proposal in which his old love of self-experimentation came together with a newly acquired interest in Gandhi and Indian philosophy. He died in Bhubaneswar in November 1964, a verse from the Gita on his lips.

The 'Indian phase' was chronologically the last of Haldane's life, but in terms of topical interest it might be regarded as the first. For in his final move Haldane decisively reversed the familiar trend, which is of Indian scientists going to the West with scarcely a backward glance at what they have left behind. He was not a 'non-resident Indian', but a 'resident non-Indian', someone who chucked up a secure position in England for an uncertain life in this country. For this reason alone an enterprising Indian publisher should reprint Clark's book. But of course there are numerous other reasons why one should read a life of JBS Haldane.

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