



Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect

By Charles Thorpe

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At a time when the Manhattan Project was synonymous with large-scale science, physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904–67) represented the new sociocultural power of the American intellectual. Catapulted to fame as director of the Los Alamos atomic weapons laboratory, Oppenheimer occupied a key position in the compact between science and the state that developed out of World War II. By tracing the making—and unmaking—of Oppenheimer’s wartime and postwar scientific identity, Charles Thorpe illustrates the struggles over the role of the scientist in relation to nuclear weapons, the state, and culture.

A stylish intellectual biography, *Oppenheimer* maps out changes in the roles of scientists and intellectuals in twentieth-century America, ultimately revealing transformations in Oppenheimer’s persona that coincided with changing attitudes toward science in society.

“This is an outstandingly well-researched book, a pleasure to read and distinguished by the high quality of its observations and judgments. It will be of special interest to scholars of modern history, but non-specialist readers will enjoy the clarity that Thorpe brings to common misunderstandings about his subject.”—Graham Farmelo, *Times Higher Education Supplement*

“A fascinating new perspective. . . . Thorpe’s book provides the best perspective yet for understanding Oppenheimer’s Los Alamos years, which were critical, after all, not only to his life but, for better or worse, the history of mankind.”—Catherine Westfall, *Nature*

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Editorial Review

Review

“This engaging and impressively documented study enables us to see how Oppenheimer’s distinctive public personality emerged from a specific set of institutions, social communities, and cultural inventories. No other book attends as carefully to the dynamics of Oppenheimer’s performance as a public figure.”

(David Hollinger, author of *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*)

“Charles Thorpe’s book gives us a fresh view of an icon. It shows how the Oppenheimer aura shaped the Los Alamos lab during World War II and was in turn shaped by it. No one surpasses the author in explaining the mysterious authority whereby Oppenheimer continued to play a major role as intellectual leader and prophet long after the government banished him from its councils.”

(Priscilla J. McMillan, author of *The Ruin of J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Birth of the Modern Arms Race*)

“Charles Thorpe’s analytically brilliant addition to the expanding Oppenheimer library of biographies, histories, and literature is remarkable for its important new ideas and analyses. Even if you have read every book written about ‘the father of the atomic bomb,’ *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect* will introduce you to a clearer and deeper understanding of the man and his time.”

(Martin J. Sherwin, coauthor of *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*)

“A masterful contribution to Oppenheimer studies. Charles Thorpe skillfully weaves together sociology, history, and biography to create a rich tapestry of Oppenheimer’s complex life and times. Thorpe provides new perspectives on Oppenheimer’s evolution as a scientific intellectual and cultural icon, as well as new insights into the changing constellation of science, state power, and the moral responsibility of the scientist, of which Oppenheimer was both a driving force and a tragic victim.”

(David C. Cassidy, author of *J. Robert Oppenheimer and the American Century*)

“Thorpe’s excellent book rescues Oppenheimer from the myth-makers, showing the context of his early leftism, the match between his special talents and the organizational setting of Los Alamos that made for his staggering success, and, most importantly, the act that proved to be his undoing: his opposition, on technical grounds, to the H-bomb, which raised questions about his loyalty and ability to separate politics from science that his previous deceptions prevented him from dispelling. Thorpe then describes the surprising dénouement: the Oppenheimer who emerged from these dramatic events was neither a martyr nor an anguished moralist, but an *homme sérieux*, with a mature acceptance of the continued necessity of nuclear military force.”

(Stephen Turner, author of *Liberal Democracy 3.0: Civil Society in an Age of Experts*)

“He is known as the father of the atomic bomb, but J. Robert Oppenheimer was much more than that. As scientific director of the Los Alamos atomic weapons laboratory during the second world war, Oppenheimer was a social symbol, a ‘nodal point’ where scientific, political and military interests clashed. It is this sociological aspect of his life that Thorpe focuses on here.”

(Sam Kean *New Scientist* 2006-11-11)

"*Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect* is not a conventional, cradle-to-grave biography like Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin's *American Prometheus*, winner of a Pulitzer Prize in 2006. Rather, Thorpe concentrates mainly on Oppenheimer's transition from academia to his post as scientific director of the Manhattan Project, and subsequently his security hearing and the period in Oppenheimer's life—as Thorpe puts it—after he was "excommunicated from the inner circle of the nuclear state." This is an outstandingly well-researched book, a pleasure to read and distinguished by the high quality of its observations and judgments. It will be of special interest to scholars of modern history, but non-specialist readers will enjoy the clarity that Thorpe brings to common misunderstandings about his subject."

(Graham Farmelo *Times Higher Education Supplement* 2007-04-20)

"Because he directed the U.S. effort to develop the atomic bomb, physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer at the height of World War II became a new kind of icon among select scientists. Perhaps never before in history had a scientist held so much power. Oppenheimer's development and oversight of the Los Alamos National Laboratory changed the dynamics of physics research and scientific ethics. Thorpe paints an illuminating picture of this charismatic teacher and researcher and documents his downfall in the aftermath of his work at Los Alamos. Thorpe notes that Oppenheimer's and his fellow scientists' concerns about the morality of developing the bomb were eclipsed by their focus on technical issues. Later, Oppenheimer became a staunch critic of the continuing development of nuclear weapons and thus made himself a target of government scrutiny. The FBI eventually accused him of being an enemy agent."

(*Science News* 2007-02-03)

"A fascinating new perspective....Thorpe's book provides the best perspective yet for understanding Oppenheimer's Los Alamos years, which were critical, after all, not only to his life but, for better or worse, the history of mankind."

(Catherine Westfall *Nature* 2007-05-24)

"[Thorpe's] book is magnificently well researched, elegantly written, and analytically profound. It is packed with new and original insights. *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect* is one of the finest books I have ever read."

(Richard Polenberg *Journal of American History*)

"Readers with an interest in sociology, identity formation, and history of science and the atomic age . . . will find this an intriguing read. It is just as much about the culture of science in World War II and early Cold War America as it is about the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer."

(Robyn Rodriguez *eHistory*)

"In his daring, concise, and sharply etched portrait of Oppenheimer, Charles Thorpe moves beyond the current literature to explore both Oppenheimer's character and his public persona. . . . An original, highly intelligent, well-researched, well-written, and deeply satisfying book."

(Lynn Eden *American Historical Review*)

"An original and compelling analysis of Oppenheimer's life and role as a scientific leader."—Mary Jo Nye, *Chemical Heritage*

(Mary Jo Nye *Chemical Heritage*)

"Charles Thorpe's superbly engaging book is less a biography of Oppenheimer than a study of social identity and self-fashioning – the kind of analysis now familiar in the history of early modern science but rarer in twentieth-century work....While many biographers have grappled with the complexities of Oppenheimer's character, Thorpe is the first to provide a thorough sociologically and culturally grounded analysis of this protean figure. The book's powerful, sophisticated and persuasive analysis adds new critical depth to our understanding of Oppenheimer. But he remains a symbol still : through him the book significantly changes the way we should think about post-war American science and twentieth century science more generally."

(Jeff Hughes *British Journal for the History of Science*)

"A deeply insightful and rigorously researched and reasoned account. . . . Thorpe utilizes new rounds of oral histories, extensive surveys of archives and existing literature, and a sharp analysis of the brotherhood who produced the first atomic bomb and of the subsequent debates on nuclear power to produce innovative insights and understandings about this enigmatic person."

(Jon Hunner *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*)

About the Author

Charles Thorpe is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, San Diego.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Michael Harmon:

Here thing why this Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect are different and reliable to be yours. First of all looking at a book is good but it depends in the content of computer which is the content is as yummy as food or not. Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect giving you information deeper as different ways, you can find any e-book out there but there is no book that similar with Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect. It gives you thrill studying journey, its open up your eyes about the thing in which happened in the world which is perhaps can be happened around you. You can bring everywhere like in recreation area, café, or even in your means home by train. In case you are having difficulties in bringing the branded book maybe the form of

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Bonnie Wilson:

That reserve can make you to feel relax. This specific book Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect was colourful and of course has pictures on there. As we know that book Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect has many kinds or style. Start from kids until youngsters. For example Naruto or Private investigator Conan you can read and feel that you are the character on there. Therefore , not at all of book usually are make you bored, any it can make you feel happy, fun and unwind. Try to choose the best book for you personally and try to like reading which.

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