

Podcast: When science and politics collide: How JBS Haldane's radical views clouded his scientific mind

Speaking with science journalist Samanth Subramanian, author of the recent biography, [A Dominant Character: The Radical Science and Restless Politics of J.B.S. Haldane](#), Dr Kat Arney explores the life and complex legacy of John Burdon Sanderson Haldane – known as JBS or Jack – whose work, writing and forceful personality made him one of the most interesting characters of 20th century genetics.

As well as being an insightful scientist, fearless self-experimenter and artful communicator, Haldane's political leanings also affected his approach to science – even at the expense of the scientific rigor that he usually applied to his endeavors.

Following the example of his father, physiologist JS Haldane who experimented on Jack as a boy, JBS Haldane was a fearless self-experimenter, to the point of nearly killing himself and his colleagues. He fought in the trenches in the first world war and was in Spain during the civil war there. He fell out with authority figures and the establishment, was a committed Communist and was suspected of being a spy.

Haldane's mathematically-minded work in genetics and evolutionary biology set the stage for the way we think about evolution today. He brought intellectual clarity to everything he did, with one notable exception: Haldane's devotion to the flawed Soviet dogma of Lysenkoism clouded his scientific thinking and set him at odds with his colleagues.

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The last years of Haldane's life were spent in India – having moved there with 12 jars of live fish for his research! – and his death from cancer in 1964 left a complex legacy of brilliant science, inspiring writing and controversial politics.

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Full show notes, transcript, music credits and references online at [GeneticsUnzipped.com](#).

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