



Ellis, Havelock (1859-1939)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Henry Havelock Ellis--British psychologist and writer--was one of the first modern thinkers to challenge Victorian taboos against the frank and objective discussion of sex. In so doing, he reassured legions of readers that they were not alone in their habits or inclinations.

Ellis was born February 2, 1859 in Surrey, England, the son of a ship's captain. In childhood he was a precocious reader who took notes on everything he read; in late youth the scientific investigation of sex caught his interest. In the 1880s he pursued studies in medicine while immersing himself in London's intellectual life.

He wrote prolifically for literary publications (George Bernard Shaw and Paul Verlaine were among his acquaintances) and began amassing research for his psychological studies.

In 1896, with four other books in print, Ellis published *Das konträre Geschlechtsgefühl* (The Contrary Sexual Sense), the first component of what eventually became a seven-volume series: *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*.

The book had begun as a collaborative work with writer John Addington Symonds, who died in 1893 before he had done much more than contribute his own and several other case histories, as well as his essay "A Problem in Greek Ethics." Hence, the book, though largely Ellis's work, was issued as the joint work of Ellis and Symonds.

When the book was published in England in 1897, under the title *Sexual Inversion*, it ignited official condemnation. Symonds's family was horrified at the work's frankness and at Symonds's name on the title page. Symonds's literary executor withdrew his permission for Ellis to cite Symonds and attempted to buy up the entire printing for destruction.

In response, the book was reissued under Ellis's name alone, with Symonds referred to only as "Z." and Symonds's "A Problem in Greek Ethics," which had been an appendix in the original edition, removed.

The reissue of the book resulted in the infamous "Bedborough trial" in which a bookseller of that name was tried and fined for obscenity. A Philadelphia publisher issued the rest of the series (addressing topics as varied as modesty, symbolism, and pain) between 1899 and 1928. By then, when Radclyffe Hall approached him for a commentary on her manuscript of *The Well of Loneliness*, Ellis was well-known in England and America, although his sexological books could not be sold openly in England until 1936.

Although Ellis did not invent the term *inversion*, his use of it gave it an imprimatur as a psychological term. He defined "congenital sexual inversion" as "sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality towards persons of the same sex." This idea of inversion as a congenital condition, biologically or genetically predetermined, was intended to contrast with contemporary notions of sexual deviance as degeneracy. It defined people attracted toward members of their own sex not in terms of pathology, but in

terms of biology.

In *Sexual Inversion* Ellis cited numerous reports of same-sex behaviors among animals and people of diverse cultures, concluding that homosexuality is both natural and, in ideal circumstances, a valid expression of love between two like-minded adults. His case studies of 33 men and 6 women were drawn from professional and social connections--a capable and gifted sampling, contrasted with the clinical profiles presented by Freud, Ellis' contemporary, with whom he corresponded.

A heterosexual, Ellis married writer Edith Lees in November 1891. Their marriage was unconventional even by today's standards. Both partners carried on numerous affairs (Edith's usually with women) and rarely lived under the same roof. Birth control crusader Margaret Sanger was one of Ellis' loves; others included socialist-feminist Olive Schreiner and Françoise Lafitte, his companion at the end of his life.

Ellis was not a public campaigner but in his writings he advocated women's rights to sexual fulfillment. He opposed criminalizing homosexual acts when the Oscar Wilde trial was still a recent memory. He emphatically repudiated the Victorian notion that masturbation was harmful and argued that it, along with other forms of "auto-erotism" (a phrase he coined), should not be stigmatized.

Ellis left behind an autobiography (published after his death), a lifetime's accumulation of journals, and a voluminous correspondence with colleagues and intimate partners. Although amazingly candid on many matters, he was ambiguous enough on others to vex biographers into speculating to what degree his studies were motivated by personal idiosyncrasies.

A complex and sensitive personality, Ellis died on July 8, 1939 in Suffolk, England, aged 80.

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