

Havelock Ellis and his ‘Studies in the Psychology of Sex’

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SUMMARY The life of Havelock Ellis is described; his personality and life experiences are related to the writing of his major work. Important sections of the ‘Studies’ are summarized and their relevance to contemporary sexology is emphasized.

Introduction

Sexology had its origin with the publication of *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886 (Johnson, 1973). The end of the last century was the golden era of German psychiatry, and in sexology major contributions were made by Moll, Bloch, Hirschfeldt and Freud. Havelock Ellis was the only major contributor to the subject from the English-speaking world, and his *Studies* made a major impact on Victorian attitudes to the normal and the abnormal aspects of sexuality (Hoenig, 1977). Isaac Goldberg (1926) wrote the first biography of Ellis, and said of him ‘It seems appropriate that the first book upon Havelock Ellis should appear in the United States: for it is in Germany and America, rather than his native England, that Ellis has been appreciated at anything like his true worth’.

Ellis has been described as a pioneer in the scientific study of sex, a thinker, a critic, an essayist and editor. His life paralleled that of Freud, and they both died in the same year, 1939, Ellis then being eighty. In addition to his *Studies* Ellis wrote extensively on social and literary topics, and made early suggestions about the setting up of a National Health Service (Ellis, 1917). He made contributions on such diverse topics as forensic psychiatry (Ellis, 1890) and sexual dimorphism (Ellis, 1894), and even attempted to emulate Galton by writing a book on British genius (Ellis, 1927). His capacity for research was, however, limited in comparison with his literary talent and enormous output.

He was born in Croydon in 1859, the eldest of five children, the others all being girls who never married. He grew up in a close, affectionate maternal relationship, while his father,

who was a ship’s captain, exerted little influence on him in his early years. He was a sensitive, intellectually precocious child, who wrote his first book, *Gems of the Bible*, at the age of 12. As a young man, he was good-looking and attractive to women. He first used the word ‘narcissistic’ to describe a specific type of sexual attitude, and there are grounds for describing Ellis himself as a narcissistic personality—he devoted five full pages of his autobiography, *My Life*, to the description of his own looks (Ellis, 1940). His wife, Edith Lees, was later to describe him as ‘embarrassingly shy, with awkward movements, a high thin voice, a lack of small talk and a habit of never looking you in the eye’.

He left school and the female environment of his home at the age of 17 to accompany his father to Australia, where he became a teacher. He spent three years in an obscure settlement, Sparkes Creek, where he underwent an adolescent crisis, experienced an intense religious conversion and was tortured with self-doubt about his own emerging sexuality. It was as a result of this that he decided to devote his life to the study of sexual behaviour, and said ‘I would make it the main business of my life to get to the real natural facts of sex for all, and so spare the youth of future generations the trouble and perplexity which this ignorance has caused me’. At the age of 21 he decided that a medical training was necessary to achieve this, and returned to England to become a medical student at St Thomas’s Hospital. From the outset, however he had no desire for ‘the ordinary physician’s life’, and largely because of his extra-curricular activities took seven years to

qualify L.M.S.S.A. He then moved to Blackburn as a locum tenens in general practice. At the end of this appointment he contracted scarlet fever, and returning home communicated the infection to his mother. Her death caused him profound grief, with much guilt and self-reproach.

A year later, while a locum in Cornwall, he met his Oldham-born wife, Edith Lees. Edith knew him from his published views on free love and sexual freedom, and it must have come as something of a shock to her after their marriage, to find that the 'sage of sex', as he had come to be known, was impotent. This topic became the subject of a novel, *Kit's Woman*, which Edith wrote and which has its theme in common with D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley*. Edith had a family history of manic-depressive psychosis and was advised not to have any children. Less than three months after their marriage, and perhaps as a result of Ellis's impotence, Edith became involved in a series of homosexual relationships; and it was around this time that Ellis began to write what was intended to be Volume 1 of his *Studies*, entitled *Sexual Inversion*. For many years their platonic relationship remained stable and she became a well-known lecturer on sexual freedoms, particularly in the United States, although her life was punctuated by episodes of depression and later by a determined suicide attempt. She died in a diabetic coma in 1916.

The marriage of a female homosexual to a constitutionally impotent male clearly resulted in a complex emotional interaction in which there was much respect and dispassionate love; the problem of mate selection continued to preoccupy Ellis throughout his life (Calder Marshall, 1959). Ellis's sexual relationships before his marriage to Edith had been no more successful, although he was extremely attractive to women. Even his relationship with the celebrated South African authoress, Olive Schreiner, ended in mutual disenchantment after their disastrous holiday in Derbyshire, where Ellis's impotence again manifested itself in the face of Olive's passionate desires.

Sexual Inversion was published in Germany in 1896. Ellis then invited the interest of the English publishers, Williams and Norgate, who were advised against publication because of the

emotive content of the work, although it was intended for a strictly professional readership. In 1897 Ellis sought a new publisher, and was put in contact with the unscrupulous Roland De Villiers, who undertook to publish the book under the imprint of the 'Watford University Press'.

The book sold quietly for a year. One of the main booksellers was an associate of De Villiers named George Bedborough, who was the organizing secretary of the Legitimation League. This was ostensibly a society for the legal reform of marriage and legitimacy, but it was known by the police to be a front for anarchists. The selling of *Sexual Inversion* by Bedborough provided the police with just the opportunity they had been seeking, and they were able to arrest him for selling pornographic literature and confiscate copies of the *Studies*. He was brought to trial at the Old Bailey in October, 1898, and although Ellis himself was not directly involved the trial gave the *Studies* a notoriety he never wished for.

At the last minute, Bedborough decided to plead guilty to the charge, and the defence collapsed. Some years later De Villiers, arrested for other offences, committed suicide. Ellis, disillusioned, sought publication in America by the firm of F. A. Davis. He finally completed the seven volume work in 1928. A shorter student's manual of the *Psychology of Sex* was published in 1933, and remains one of the best texts on the subject for medical students.

Eventually the *Studies* received world-wide acclaim, though Ellis's wife Edith remained sarcastic about the work. 'His sex books are motley. He is a poet and a philosopher and all the rest is nonsense'. Her view may have arisen from his devoting a whole volume to sexual inversion, which was her problem, and only a few paragraphs to impotence, which was his.

The 'Studies'

This is Ellis's major work and the one for which he will be remembered. It begins with an essay on Modesty, which he defined as 'an instinctive fear, prompting concealment, about sexual processes'. He was always afraid of women, and for this reason insisted that 'modesty in women was necessary for the arousal

of the normal male'. He supported this with a quotation from Burton that 'the greatest provocation of lust is from apparel', and with numerous other anecdotes from Casanova to Shakespeare. Modesty, he insisted, was related to the proximity of the genitalia to the excretory organs. This provoked disgust which had to be overcome before sexual arousal could occur, and here he cited his own experiences in midwifery. He analysed his own morbid sexual arousal by urination in women; he termed this undinism, and in his autobiography he dated it to the singular occasion when his mother, dressed in full-length skirt, urinated in his presence while they were visiting the London Zoo. He added: 'It was not until the age of 16 that the trait became a conscious and active element in my mind. It proved of immense benefit to me for it was the germ of a perversion, and it enabled me to understand sympathetically the nature of perversions'.

Ellis was responsible for introducing the term auto-eroticism, and he discussed at length the universal indulgence in masturbation in both sexes, and its role in causing impotence and frigidity where its habitual practice becomes the individual's preferred form of sexual behaviour. Nonetheless, he condoned the practice as a necessary sexual sedative in organized society. He emphasized how common was sexual anaesthesia in women, and, based upon his anecdotal case histories, he attributed it to constitutional factors.

It is understandable that Ellis in the early years of his studies was impressed with the writings of Freud. He corresponded freely with Freud, who invited him to join the International Psychoanalytical Association. But Freud later became annoyed by an article Ellis wrote in 1921, describing Freud quite casually as an artist and not a scientist; he attributed this to Ellis's 'highly sublimated resistance'. Ernest Jones said 'Finding himself displaced by Freud, his jealous nature led him to write about his work with increasingly carping spirit, which ended in a completely negative attitude'. From then on, a wide gulf which never closed developed between their views on sexual biology. Ellis's final summing up of his views on Freud are to be found in an article in the *Journal of*

Mental Sciences for 1917, where he wrote as follows:

'It must not therewith be concluded that any of the conceptions Freud has so artfully woven will of necessity endure permanently. He changes them so often himself that it would be foolish to suppose that his successors will not continue the same process. In this respect we may compare him with Lombroso . . . His theories have been proved to be often defective, even his facts will not always bear examination . . . Yet he enlarged the human horizon, he discovered new fields for fruitful research and new methods for investigating them. That was something bigger than either a sound theory or a precise collection of facts, for we do not demand of a Columbus that he shall be a reliable surveyor of the new world he discovers. Freud, similarly and to a greater extent, has enlarged our horizon. He has shown the existence of a vast psychic field of which before we had but scanty intimations. The human soul will never again be to human eyes what it was before Freud explored it'.

Ellis wrote extensively on those forms of sexual deviation which he preferred to call erotic symbolism, which he defined as, 'A tendency whereby the attention is diverted from the central focus of sexual attraction to some object or process which is on the periphery of this focus, or is even outside it altogether, although recalling it by association of contiguity'. He gave extensive descriptions and biographies of the Marquis de Sade and Sacher-Masoch, and the early influence of psychoanalysis upon Ellis is obvious in his statement that love was a combat in which women are stimulated by physical submissiveness, whilst the male characteristic was the display of force and the infliction of simulated pain in the orgasm—Ellis equated this with an epileptic fit or death. He emphasized how common was some element of sexual symbolism in all sexual relationships and held that the origin of pathological degrees of erotic symbolism arose from some congenital predisposition associated with precocious sexual experience. Unlike many of his continental contemporaries, Ellis was not a practising physician and relied heavily upon anthropological data and personal contacts from which to draw his conclusions. Compared with modern textbooks, Ellis had little to say about the treatment of sexual anomalies, and man-

agement was largely directed at the patient coming to terms with his difficulties and modifying life accordingly. This was well demonstrated in his lengthy case report 'The History of Florrie, and the Mechanism of Sexual Deviation'. Florrie was a disturbed young woman who wrote to him and whom he treated by correspondence. Over a three year period, he sent her no less than sixty lengthy communications, and eventually he wrote up her case in the *Psychoanalytic Review* in 1919. She was afflicted with desires for flagellation, associated with urolagnia. She was eventually reconciled to having sexual relationships with her husband, but without gratification. Ellis's conclusion is all-important—'The therapeutic result, as always in this field, does not lie in the personality being forced into a rigid alien mould, for that would not be normal. It lies in enabling the subject to see herself not being artificially changed but being rightly harmonized'.

In his volume on homosexuality or, as he preferred to call it, sexual inversion, Ellis distinguished homosexuality from transsexualism, for which he used his own term, eonism, after the biographical descriptions of the Chevalier d'Éon. He gave a lengthy illustration in the case history of 'James' Barrie, who became the head of the Army Medical Services in the early 19th century, emphasizing the absence of sexual eroticism in this condition, an observation not sufficiently brought out in recent accounts. Ellis gave some fascinating descriptions of the Molly houses, where homosexual practices were solicited in the 19th century, and illustrated his ideas about homosexuality with twenty case histories of homosexuals known personally to him. He devoted an equally detailed section to homosexuality in women, an interest no doubt determined by his wife's orientation. He concluded that homosexuality was not a disease but a biological variant, and emphasized how it could occur through circumstance, through seduction or through disappointments in love—with the last, no doubt, accepting responsibility for Edith's homosexual involvement. He recognized masturbation as a reinforcing mechanism, in line with present-day behaviouristic theory, but

basically his view was that an inborn organic sexual impulse was necessary. Again he had little to say about treatment; he mentioned hypnosis and association therapy, but here again his own views can be seen as in line with present-day methods of management. He concluded 'I am inclined to say that if we can enable an invert to be healthy, self-restrained and self-respecting, we have often done better than to try and convert him into a mere feeble simulacrum of a normal man'.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in sexual physiology, derived from the Masters and Johnson publication *The Human Sexual Response*. They claimed that 'there is an abysmal level of knowledge of the uterus and sexual organs in response to sexual stimulation'. (Masters and Johnson, 1966). This is far from true, and Ellis in his section on detumescence described many experiments in animals and observations in man of the rhythmic contractions of the vagina, uterus and Fallopian tubes during orgasm, and of the erection of the uterus through its own musculature and the round ligaments. He referred to the Greek views of the uterus as an animal with movements of its own, and reminded us that even Aristotle knew that the womb was capable of aspirating seminal fluid deposited in the vagina. The active part played by the uterus and Fallopian tubes during orgasm was common knowledge in the biological circles of Ellis's day, and it is difficult to see why so many clinicians have become excited by similar descriptions by Masters and Johnson nearly fifty years later.

Ellis's comments on impotence were sparse. He had some strange views, such as that vesical projectile power equated with sexual potency, and that inability to whistle was highly correlated with impotence—he was deficient in both of these capacities. It was only when he was in his sixties that he finally achieved sexual potency with the young Françoise Lafitte. Ellis's impotence throughout his marriage to Edith Lees drew comments similar to those made about his contemporary, Bernard Shaw, that he was a latent homosexual. There is no evidence to support this, and his impotence seems to have been of an early-onset constitutional type (Johnson, 1968).

The sexless pattern of his own married life must have determined his own views on marriage. He gave a lengthy anthropological discussion on marriage with quotations from Fraser's *Golden Bough* and Westermarck's *History of Marriage*. He advocated prolonged preparation for marriage, advising that people should live together for many years and follow 'the sound Catholic plan of a novitiate, for the purpose of determining this true vocation'.

He emphasized the nature of the slow sexual arousal of the female, and the necessity for sexual education in this matter for the male. He was in no sense in favour of what today is called Women's Lib, and was vehemently against women attempting to emulate men in the professions. Women, to Ellis, were in all ways different from men; they had different roles and different attributes, and they should have freedom of opportunity to nurture these.

In spite of his impotence, Ellis wrote a section on 'The Art of Love', but it was not influenced by his own experiences. He emphasized how common were fellatio and cunnilingus as sexual preliminaries in all sections of society, thirty years before Alfred Kinsey was to underline this point, and he upheld coitus reservatus as the ideal to which all men should aim in the art of love. Sexual chastity and abstinence much concerned him, and he gave an interesting discussion of the evidence for its harmful effects upon mental processes, particularly in the male, and of its role in the causation of sexual perversion and impotence.

Arising from this was the contemporary discussion about the role of the physician in advising patients, especially men, about indulgence in extra-marital intercourse for the treatment of impotence. This has particular relevance to the use of surrogate partners in the sex therapy of Masters and Johnson. Ellis saw this advice as no part of a physician's duty. 'In giving such a prescription, the physician has not in fact the slightest knowledge of what he may be prescribing . . . The solution must be for the patient himself to work out as best he can, for it involves social and other considerations, which, while they are by no means outside the sphere of medicine, are certainly entirely outside the control of the individual private

practitioner of medicine. He is recommending a remedy the nature of which he could not publicly avow, and so destroying public confidence in himself'.

The final volume of the *Studies* is devoted to sexual behaviour in relationship to society, as opposed to the individual, and it was the volume which most appealed to its author. He surveyed the fields of sex education, marriage, the art of love, morality, venereal disease, procreation and abortion. He was a firm believer in sex education by the mother, although from his autobiography it is doubtful if his own mother ever enlightened him. He continually emphasized Victorian views on alcoholism, its detrimental effects on sexual life and its harmful effects upon the foetus in the intoxicated pregnant woman. He cited experimental evidence from 1906 on the teratogenic effects of alcohol in pregnant animals to support his assertions on its effects in humans. This is relevant to the recent work reporting a significant incidence of mongoloid features in children born to alcoholic mothers. This volume was largely based upon social anthropological data, but its conclusions can still be read with profit.

Conclusion

After the completion of the *Studies* in 1928, Ellis wrote little else of importance although he lived for a further eleven years. As a postscript to his autobiography, he concluded 'The work I was born to do is done, as the great poet wrote, when at last he had completed his task. Although I am not entitled to sing any *Nunc dimittis*, I am well aware that the task that has occupied the best part of my life can have left few years and little strength for any work that now comes after'.

Havelock Ellis is now almost a forgotten figure, and his *Studies* are being superseded by less erudite but more popular works. He was one of the great Victorian medical scholars, and his *magnum opus* greatly influenced the medical and social attitudes towards sexual behaviour, and indeed still has much to say today. He will not be remembered like Darwin, Mendel or Kraepelin for changing the direction of his subject, or for the originality of his work, but

he will claim a unique place in medical history for his ability to synthesize and consolidate widespread knowledge in the field of sexual biology, to evaluate it and present it in a scholarly manner.

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(Received 6 June; revised 4 July 1978)