Henry Havelock Ellis, known as Havelock Ellis, was a British doctor, sexual psychologist, and social reformer. He was born February 2, 1859, in Croydon, England. Ellis's family had strong connections to the sea. His mother Susannah Wheatley Ellis’s father was a sea captain, as was his father, Edward Peppen Ellis. After being educated in England, Ellis moved to Sydney, Australia, in 1875. He worked at a variety of private schools, but found this life to be isolating and unfulfilling. Ellis returned to England in 1879 for medical training at St. Thomas’ Hospital. Since the age of 16, he had wanted to study sex and obtaining a medical degree was the best means to pursue this goal. Ellis married writer Edith Lees in 1891. They had an unusual marriage for the period; although intellectually and emotionally close, both had romantic partners outside of the marriage partially because of Ellis’s difficulties with physical intimacy and because Lees was a lesbian.

Ellis’s early writings primarily consist of essays in arts, literature, and philosophy. After completing his medical training, Ellis devoted his life to the study of sex. His exploration of sexuality centered on studying the biological, intellectual, and emotional components of men and women. He believed that sexuality was natural for men and woman and that both sexes were capable of having fulfilling sexual lives. Ellis’s approach to studying sex signified a cultural shift in how society understood sexuality and sexual behavior. He approached the subject scientifically, without moral judgment. Part of his intellectual circle included reformers Edward Carpenter and Margaret Sanger, John Addington Symonds, and Sigmund Freud. Ellis was a proponent of Freud’s theories and was instrumental in popularizing Freud’s work. Ellis was also a strong advocate of eugenics.

Ellis differed from early sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who believed that sexual behavior was acquired. Ellis believed that one’s sexuality was part of someone’s biology, a congenital condition. One of his first medical studies, Sexual Inversion, was written in collaboration with Symonds. They theorized that homosexuality or “sexual inversion” is simply an inborn abnormality that turns a person’s sexual instinct toward members of the same sex. Ellis believed this condition naturally occurs in all species. Any attempt at finding a cure is futile because it goes against the nature of the invert. Eventually this piece became part of a larger collection of research, Studies in the Psychology of Sex, published in 1910, where Ellis also introduced research on autoeroticism, narcissism, and connections of pain with sexual behavior and concepts of love.

Ellis died July 8, 1939. He is widely recognized as a pioneer in the development of modern conceptions of sexuality. Although he faced challenges in having his work published, Ellis is widely studied today, providing a foundation for contemporary research on sexuality and gender.

See also
Homosexuality; Sexuality and Reproduction

Further Readings

Kristina B. Wolff


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