

The Pursuit of Serenity: Havelock Ellis and the New Politics

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This is an important book which deserves wide circulation. It is perhaps the only satisfactory extended study yet produced of that important cultural figure Havelock Ellis and the impact of his writings. The parlous state of Ellis scholarship was recently demonstrated by Vernon Rosario's otherwise excellent edited volume *Science and Homosexualities* (1997). Hardly a chapter failed to allude to some passage in Ellis's works, yet the book as a whole neglected to include any chapter on Ellis himself (or even on his close colleague, Edward Carpenter). There have been a number of biographies, ranging from the hagiographic to the critical, but these have all tended to emphasise the dramatic soap-opera aspects of the emotional and sexual lives of Ellis and his circle rather than supplying a reasoned assessment of his place in history. Narrowly biographical focus has also tended to occlude the broader historical context within which Ellis was operating, leading to distortions in the analysis of his work. Grosskurth, for example, suggested that Ellis's lack of attention to 'normal' male sexuality was the result of his personal idiosyncracies, although for just about everyone writing about sex in later nineteenth century, it formed an assumed and uninterrogated norm against which deviancy could be defined. Indeed, the 'normal' heterosexual male has largely continued to be ignored by sexual investigators.

Nottingham rightly concedes of Ellis that 'it would never be possible to establish a clear distinction between his life and his books' (p. 7) and he is extremely clear on the significance for the writings, and for the perceptions of Ellis within the public domain, of the private events of Ellis's life. He pays attention, therefore, to the intricacies of the seminal period as a schoolteacher in the Australian outback, during which Ellis's ideas were formed and his sense of mission developed. His complex and formative relationship with the South African feminist writer, Olive Schreiner, and the difficulties of his marriage to the predominantly lesbian Edith Lees, are analysed, as is the importance of his congenial relationship with pioneer homosexual rights activist, socialist and early 'green', Edward Carpenter, and their empowering mutual sense of being engaged in a common purpose.

However, Nottingham does not get bogged down in the intricate minutiae of Ellis's relationships. Instead,

one of the major strengths of *The Pursuit of Serenity*, is a thoroughly historically grounded sociological awareness, not only of 'the sociological improbability' of Ellis's own career, but of his relationship to the intellectual currents of his time, the make-up of the constituency to which he appealed, and the reasons why he did so. Nottingham suggests that Ellis and his milieu need to be examined within a framework of generational revolt, in particular the late nineteenth century rebellion against the cherished ideals and conventions of Victorianism. This wide-ranging 'New Spirit' is perceptively described and analysed. Influenced by a remarkably diverse range of thinkers, it covered a range of what may now appear to be incongruous and even contradictory social causes. As Nottingham demonstrates, there were not only personal contacts between this social current and the aesthetic/decadent movement in the arts (Ellis shared chambers with the decadent poet Arthur Symonds), but strong intellectual links between these apparently distinct responses to 'Victorian humbug' (as indeed Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism* reminds us).

Nottingham brilliantly reconstructs a world of 'earnest little societies', a 'vigorous, if precarious, radical press eager enough to accept earnest articles', and 'a number of adventurous publications... beginning to search out a new audience for intellectual literature' and to offer advances to likely providers of this (p. 80). 'Science' was a catchword; as Nottingham perceptively remarks, it was 'a way of looking at the world, a side to be on, a vantage point from which to dismiss old fashioned moral judgement', almost entirely distinct from the activities and concerns of an actual, increasingly professionalised, scientific community (p. 88). This milieu provided Ellis with outlets, a forum, an audience, and an income. If he was so shy at meetings that he 'sat at the literature table near the draughty door' (p. 7), he 'became a lion when he took up his pen', manifesting 'boldness... intellectual ability... security of agenda and certainty of purpose' (p. 80-1). Eccentric perhaps but by no means marginal, rather, he played a central part in this significant intellectual current.

Ellis's writings on sexuality, principally the seven massive volumes of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, which appeared over a period of thirty years, have been routinely, and usually uncritically, mined for exemplary goblets of late nineteenth century sexology, mostly presented from a pejorative angle. Such cherry-picking has seldom been entirely clear, when presenting the material thus gleaned, as to whether the opinions and theories cited with horror from the perspective of 1970s radical feminism or gay theory were even those of Ellis himself, or citations from the innumerable other authorities quoted in his encyclopaedic compilation. Nottingham carefully places Ellis's work as sexual enlightener as less ground-breaking than usually conceived, suggesting that he was in fact articulating the discontents and aspirations of a constituency already moving beyond accepted conventions, if perhaps only in theory and speculation rather than practice. Given the almost mediumistic role played by Ellis in gathering up and expressing the range of ideas current at the time, it is possible (and I must plead somewhat guilty myself) to prove just about anything about Ellis's ideas by judicious selection from Ellis's writings - as with one of his own heroes, Walt Whitman, he was large, he contained multitudes, he contradicted himself, and, over his very long career, he sometimes changed his mind.

In his account of the life and writings Nottingham deals mainly with Ellis prior to 1914 (while considering the much longer extended period of his influence), a legitimate choice to sharpen the focus in dealing with an individual who had a long life and produced numerous writings and also in keeping with Nottingham's concept of generational rebellion. Ellis can be and often has been characterised as the product of a specific late nineteenth century moment, a last Victorian rather than an early modernist/moderniser (though his influence on modernism in the widest sense has only begun to be explored with any seriousness). The bulk of the *Studies* (volumes one to six) had appeared by 1910 (with a late coda in 1927) and as Nottingham persuasively argues, the theories and personal stance which Ellis had generated by the first decade of the twentieth century did not undergo any radical alterations under the impact of either wider political events (such as the First World War) or events within his personal life. It is possible that Nottingham may have rather underplayed the influence on Ellis's thought about women and marriage in particular of several important relationships with women in his middle years. He not only entered a second, common-law, marriage with Françoise Lafitte-Cyon (also known as Françoise DeLisle), but had liaisons with, among other dynamic women of the day, American birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger and the Imagist poet Hilda

Doolittle ('H.D'), as well as close if probably non-sexual friendships with women exploring new avenues of female subjectivity, such as Stella Browne and 'Bryher' - Winifred Ellerman, H.D.'s close companion. Yet although later works (such as the 1933 *Psychology of Sex*) demonstrated that Ellis kept up with scientific developments, revealing him as well abreast of the recent explosion of endocrinological knowledge, they indicate a process of continuous accretion to, and moderation of, the existing corpus, rather than profound conceptual change or development. Certainly the ideas about female sexuality advanced in such essays as 'The erotic rights of women' and 'The play-function of sex', had been prefigured in the chapters on marriage in *Sex in Relation to Society*.

Nottingham draws attention to the strong 'spiritual' component in Ellis's thought and writings: as with Carpenter, the Church had been considered as a career-path before the rejection of conventional Christian beliefs, and there remained both a characteristically English nature-mysticism, and concern for non-material values. It would have been nice to see this related to the interest in alternative forms of religion, such as theosophy, so common in progressive circles of the time. It would appear that he introduced Margaret Sanger to Rosicrucianism, which remained a life-long interest of hers, during a visit to Ireland. However, the aura of spirituality detached from any too specific doctrinal commitment, surely played a large part in Ellis's appeal. His writings could be, and were, referred to and recommended with no feelings of embarrassment or inappropriateness by religious writers of the interwar period, for example A. Herbert Gray and Leslie Weatherhead, when advancing their new visions of Christian marriage.

This lack of too close specificity in doctrine also applies, as it becomes clear from Nottingham's astute analysis, to Ellis's political agenda. He was 'clearly interested in a series of issues which were political in any ordinary sense' however, 'he had no concern for the conventional means of politics' (p. 217). Almost allergic to conflict and strife, he posited a benign evolution towards a harmonious state. His works eschewed demagoguery and preaching in favour of addressing himself 'as if... to an assenting community', assuming the agreement of the reader (p. 213). He saw real reform as taking place through the creation of a more enlightened public opinion, fanning out from an initial small group or clusters of like-minded individuals, who would embody in lifestyle choices 'an alternative to the hypocrisy and needless complexity of modern life' (p. 212). The agents of the transformation of society as Ellis envisaged it were not politicians and statesmen but 'the doctor in his consulting room, the teacher in the school, the preacher in the pulpit, the journalist in the press' (p. 222). When presented with the more intractable political choices he had 'a habitual tendency to drift into transcendentalism': yet, if sometimes politically naive, he was not politically ignorant, and his circles included a large number of activists representing a wide spectrum of affiliations. Indeed, many of the causes to which he was devoted had their adherents among those engaged in what is more usually considered the political sphere. But his very lack of the doctrinaire surely assisted in the gentle spread of his theories, through a failure to stimulate any of the usual antibodies against their consideration or acceptance.

One of the great achievements of this book is to define the audience which was influenced either directly by Havelock Ellis's writings, or the idea of 'Havelock Ellis', the 'Sage of Sex', the prophet of sexual enlightenment and a utopian vision of the harmonious life. Nottingham convincingly argues that 'the relationship between the metropolitan lecturers on the tramp and their provincial listeners' forms the clue to 'the expansion of Ellis's readership and his position in the intellectual history of radical and progressive politics' (p. 223). There was a 'growing market for progressive ideas' in provincial England at the beginning of the twentieth century among the 'villa-bound seekers after truth'. Here, Nottingham suggests, there was a deep resonance between the new values Ellis created from his own socially ambiguous status, and the needs of those experiencing similar strains, especially the expanding group of lower middle-class professionals. He provided them with a 'politics... that would do service as a philosophy of life', worthy of their dedication to its service, while assisting in the creation of personal and social identity: a politics that was about principle and influence rather than power (p. 233). These aspirants could feel part of a larger network, a virtual 'community of enlightenment', even if themselves peripheral to the conventional centres of political power. (The kind of communities they formed, or at least constituted an influential group within, are represented, not entirely unkindly, through the eyes of Richard Hannay in the 'Garden City' of 'Biggleswick' in the

opening chapters of John Buchan's First World War thriller *Mr Standfast*..)

Ellis has been criticised, notably by Phyllis Grosskurth in the most recent biography, for failing to create a theory and a school of thought comparable to Freud and psychoanalysis: one of Nottingham's greatest services in this book is to show how beside the point such a criticism is. In a very telling phrase he comments that this 'has something of the air of denying a canary a prize in a cat show' (p. 244). As Nottingham points out Ellis was a 'fastidious, painfully self-conscious and secretive individual', much of whose personal life was conducted by correspondence (surely he would have relished the Internet). His lack of combativeness was exacerbated by the excruciating ordeal of the prosecution of *Sexual Inversion* for obscenity in 1898. While he may have perceived himself as a seer, or even a prophet, he rejected (indeed, demonstrably flinched away from) the status of guru or leader and spent much time evading attempts to constitute him as such. Falling outside the parameters of this work, Norman Haire's attempts to set himself up as Ellis's chief disciple on his arrival in England from Australia, and his failure to gain more than very general statements of support from an elusive Ellis for the World Sexual Reform Congress in London, 1929, are an amusing story in themselves. They form a paradigm of the relationship between these two very different personalities, Haire the relentless self-promoter with his profitable, and occasionally skirting the illegal, Harley Street practice, his vigorous involvement in organisations and public activity, forming almost the antithesis to Ellis.

There are one or two slight niggles: was Brixton quite such a geographically black hole as Nottingham implies? - or is this overlaying the modern transport network upon early twentieth century London? It was off the fashionable map, and undoubtedly inconvenient for casual dropping in, but hardly as much of a gruelling pilgrimage as Carpenter's Milthorpe. Surely there were trams and buses? Stella Browne, for example, was at one time making the journey from Chelsea to take tea with Ellis relatively often.

While, as indicated at the outset, the state of Ellis scholarship is deplorable, the rather early cut-off date of the works cited by Nottingham mean that a number of recent works which endeavour to place the sexological project in its wider cultural context have been overlooked. Rosario's *Science and Homosexualities* has already been mentioned, and the essays in Lucy Bland and Laura Doan's *Sexology in Culture* (1998) similarly provide some new ways of looking at the influence of Ellis and his contemporaries. But this book is so solid in its research, going where nobody has yet gone, that this is but a minor cavil and far from being a major lacuna.

Finally, it must be said that this book is very well-written and a joy to read. Ellis himself was a remarkable stylist - as Rebecca West, herself no mean mistress of English prose, commented. Nottingham's own prose-style does not suffer when in conjunction with quoted passages, and some of his lines indeed stand comparison with West's wonderful characterisation of Ellis as sustaining 'in the most difficult circumstances' the 'inveterate appearance... of being a character out of *Cranford*'. Nottingham has produced a subtly-argued and nuanced study which, while far from uncritical of Ellis as a man and a thinker, explains why and how he became such an important and influential figure in the intellectual life of twentieth-century Britain.

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