Reviews

Havelock Ellis: eros and explanation

by Andrew Brink

Phyllis Grosskurth. *Havelock Ellis: A Biography*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. Pp. xiv, 492. C$22.50; US$16.95.

IT IS SAID that we live in an era of "compulsive sexuality". But have sexual habits changed entirely from what they were in Victorian times? What sections of society have been most affected and in what ways by permissiveness? Social scientists have not kept pace with the changes, nor have they dispelled fears that traditional morality has been fatally weakened by sexual liberation. Unfortunately for society, accurate measurement of social change is usually the work of distant hindsight. We are fortunate, however, that biographical studies of the anti-Victorian prophets of sexual liberation are now appearing. Writers as disparate as Freud, Russell and D.H. Lawrence have received searching biographical study. To these is now added the best documented biography we may hope for of Havelock Ellis, the first modern student of sexuality.

Phyllis Grosskurth's biography of Ellis (1859–1938) indicates the stage we have reached in understanding the liberators. There is no claim that Ellis ranks in influence with Freud, Russell or even Lawrence. Ellis always stood in puzzled subordination to Freud. Russell, the younger man, certainly learned from Ellis, but Russell was far more widely recognized as an all-embracing liberal thinker, while Lawrence had creative powers to project his apocalyptic vision of sexuality quite denied to Ellis. Ellis is the lesser light, yet he was more pointedly a liberator than they. Ellis addressed the question of sexual behaviour directly and exclusively, making a life's work of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* and related books. These books opened the way to systematic study of sexuality by Kinsey and Masters and Johnson, and at the popular level to a whole new ethos of sexual freedom loudly acclaimed in the pages of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*—hardly an outcome

to please Ellis.

Ellis is one of the great pioneer social scientists, whose work prepared us to look at life phenomenologically. He knew that by merely describing sexual behaviour he was an innovator, in the vanguard of what came to be called "the tradition of the new". Yet Ellis naturally catches echoes from the nineteenth-century. Thomas Carlyle's prophetic genius and the curious sexual utopianism of James Hinton, which so impressed the young Ellis, are detectable in his "scientific" writings. But Ellis succeeded in writing dispassionately about questions obviously sexually loaded for him. His books are models of order and clarity, too phenomenological to compete with Freud's theoretical daring and brilliance in his excursions into sexual anthropology such as *Totem and Taboo*. Where Freud scintillates, Ellis is cool and understating, but the reader of Ellis on such topics as homosexuality and the perversions cannot miss the fervent undercurrent. As Grosskurth puts it, "*Epater les bourgeois* seems to have been a motivating force behind most of his books" (p. 207). Undoubtedly Ellis, as much as Shaw or Wells, was against bourgeois morality, but we may wonder whether this was his basic motive for writing, and whether the biographer isn't obligated to her subject to show the fundamental reasons for his objections to restrictive Victorian sexual mores, including the hallowed institution of marriage.

Ellis was able to marry, but a woman so unstable that the relationship did not hold. Soon after marriage Edith Ellis proved the supposition that she was lesbian. "He clearly entered the marriage with his eyes open, but naive enough to believe that her love for him would rule out female rivals" (p. 145). When their companionate marriage became legal, troubles began that eventually intensified her mental illness to the point of suicide attempts. Where Ellis was tentative, Edith simply could not stand the intimacy of a married relationship. Disadvantaged by her mother's early death and by her father's cruelty, Edith, in her own words, became a "waif and an alien" (p. 250). She was a brilliant lecturer and writer on topics of relationship, but she could not hold her own life together. She was erratic and conflicted to the end, leaving Ellis feeling as helpless as he was bereft at her death. Edith had possessed enormous vitality; she was celebrated by those holding the most "advanced" opinions on both sides of the Atlantic but, as Ellis remarked, "she was always a child" (p. 272). It is sobering to think how much uncriticized influence she wielded. What then of Ellis himself?

The biography cautiously examines Ellis's own curious sexual proclivities. Supposed by some to be crypto-homosexual, the truth seems to have been that Ellis liked women but remained detached, almost asexual. Grosskurth quotes Anatole James who knew Ellis: "He understood all about sex, but I don't think he knew how to do it. In fact, I was sure he had never done it" (p. 218). Ellis's relation to women—and he knew many of the most gifted of his era, including Olive Schreiner, Margaret Sanger and Hilda Doolittle, was somewhat off centre. He needed them but in a very special way: to satisfy a perverse wish to watch and to hear them urinate. This sexual special preference is suggested as a possible key to Ellis's relational difficulties. As he goes along, the reader has to guess at what the author thinks of its significance. Nor is it made entirely clear that the spectacle of women urinating helped to dispel Ellis's impotence. It was, however, a gratification he surrounded with an elaborate private mythology, as though it held some ultimate truth. Curiously, many of the women happily played along. To the outsider this may seem silly, but to Ellis it was very real and for real reasons. In childhood, as his autobiography *My Life* reveals, Ellis had exclusive attention from his mother during long absences of his sea captain father. Ellis was the eldest child and only son, whose intimacy with his mother included sponging her back and being present when he was twelve and older as she urinated. (His sister, when she heard of one incident, thought that their mother was being flirtatious, since normally she was rather a reserved person.) The consequences of this malimprinting Ellis dignified with the term urolagnia, which he denied had become a real perversion or a dominant interest in his sexual life. His candour had limits, and the evidence is otherwise.

His companion in later life, Françoise Lafitte, called Ellis's urolagnia a "harmless anomaly", defending it against objectors (p. 287). Françoise became his "Naiad"—the water nymph—and they both seem to have enjoyed the fantasy. Indeed the perversion proved harmless enough to women experiencing it, but from Ellis's point of view it signalled a basic relational disturbance over which he had little or no control but which he felt unwilling to submit to such therapeutic abreacting techniques as those proposed by Freud in the 1890s. The secondary gains had become too valuable for him to want to give up his "anomaly". It is hard to blame him for this tenacity; in fact I admire Ellis for the amount of truth about maladaptive sexuality he got into his books. Without the urgency of his own situation he could hardly have worked so effectively against the taboos binding the study of sexuality. He probably took self-disclosure as far as he could without imperilling his scientific work. I am less happy with his biographer for not making a tighter interpretive pattern of the evidence she gathers. Grosskurth is cryptic and suggestive where, by reference for instance to such recent studies as Robert Stoller's *Perversion: the Erotic Form of Hatred* (1975), she might have given a more instructive view of Ellis's personality. Here is the measure of the position reached in biographical understanding of those teachings which brought on the "compulsive sexuality" of our time. We must surely learn to understand better the personalities of prophets of sexuality rather than simply tell their stories along

with hints about what they may mean.

Perhaps if Grosskurth had followed Stoller her biography would not have been so widely welcomed. Let us glance at the issues he raises. Stoller's thesis is that perversion is an enacted fantasy, "a habitual, preferred aberration necessary for one's full satisfaction, primarily motivated by hostility" (p. 4). But how could gentle, scholarly and reclusive Ellis have felt hostility when he initiated women so gently into his urinary fantasy? Stoller continues: "The hostility in perversion takes form in a fantasy of revenge hidden in the actions that make up the perversion and serves to convert childhood trauma to adult triumph" (p. 4). It is, in other words, the conversion of early painful sexually laden experience into a later pleasurable form that requires enactment. In Ellis's instance the trauma of witnessing his mother urinate was converted into the hostile pleasure of humiliating other women, women in no way connected with his mother, by persuading them to do something for reasons mainly unintelligible to them. When he had the gratification of inducing Françoise to urinate in crowded Oxford Circus, she may not have felt especially humiliated. With such an initiate his satisfaction was mainly symbolic. Nevertheless there were women who objected for this reason, who felt demeaned and who resented Ellis gaining control over them. His mesmeric gentleness could not dispel the feeling that something was wrong. Thus the actual historical trauma caused by his mother was relieved in a control-seeking, pleasure-giving way that was both compulsive and repetitive. But it was not really relieved, because Ellis sought the further comfort of rationalization. The perversion was enough on his mind for him to write it into his seventh volume of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. There he dignifies the pathological sounding "urolagnia" with the new and enticing term "undinism". Grosskurth thinks that this volume came into existence principally to defend the perversion which is not discussed elsewhere. Ellis's lurking hostility to women (his wish to control and to humiliate) and his gender confusion are not topics easily dealt with in a popular biography, but they should soon be removed from the shadows. "Liberating" trends are not simply inevitable; they especially demand the closest study that we can give them.

As a well documented, skilfully and sometimes brilliantly handled interim report Grosskurth's biography is an asset in cultural studies. But as she says, she was surprised to find just what Ellis's main preoccupations were, and her discussion of them is accordingly adjusted. She probably correctly judged her readers for what they would accept, but I think that more of Ellis's pain and struggle would not have gone amiss. It is rightly said that while Ellis was a "seminal figure" creating the "modern sensibility", "he would not have been happy with the world he helped to create" (p. xv). This comment is important: why would Ellis have felt that we are so astray?

Grosskurth rightly detects a strong moral component in Ellis's makeup. He was a reformer and a self-corrector too, mistaken by his superficial readers as a prophet of free love, even (laughably) mistaken as a great lover himself. Ellis's service, along with Krafft-Ebing's, was to display the great variety of sexuality (with or without love) in human experience. He thus eased the collective Victorian bad conscience that destructively nagged so many. This was a signal service, reducing needless mental suffering. But Ellis was also playing his own desperate game with the inner life, a game at which he lost as much as he won. This indeed comes out in Grosskurth's account of the many love affairs into which he entered seeking a futile sustainment, given the mistrusting and hostile premises from which he acted unawares. These affairs make exciting reading, for his women were among the most clever of the age and the book consists largely of narrating what went on. But finally how frustrating it was for almost everybody.

There is little sense of sustained relational pleasure and fulfilment. The amours are troubling private escapades, foreshadowing those of Bloomsbury, that brought much more frustrated heart-ache than ecstasy. G.E. Moore's influential chapter on "The Ideal" in *Principia Ethica* extolling friendship, love and aesthetic pleasure is said to have transfixed Bloomsbury, but it seems clear that the impetus to make an ultimate good of sexuality was already strong in such writers as Ellis and Edward Carpenter. Yet if the erotic partnerings of Bloomsbury seemed ideal, Ellis had brought them down to the descriptive level of what people actually do with each other. Idealism and realism have been in constant competition through the period of liberation. Ellis, we remember, was also an idealizer, speaking of his sexual wishes in an elaborate language of myth. Nobody easily takes to the full reality of such things, and Ellis's balance must have been precarious. Much has happened since to reduce the idealism surrounding sexual relationships and to accustom us to their animal origins. A reader of Ellis in 1980 sees Gay Talese's *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, about compulsive sex and permissive sexuality in permissive America, already on the horizons. Ellis would have been stunned by the crudity of such a society. In some measure it embodies the results of the misinterpretation of his work.

Ellis needs to be explicitly studied in this perspective, but not perhaps by a biographer. The essence of his character is another matter and, in understanding this, Grosskurth puts us a long way ahead of former biographies by Isaac Goldberg, John Stewart Collis and Arthur Calder-Marshall. She conveys his miraculous honesty in studying sexuality with the directness he did. Ellis went against the grain, risking collective censure. Under the obscenity law his scientific works could not be published in England. But Ellis worked on. He was reclusive, keeping to his business and taking endearing pleasures such as genealogy and sun bathing in his garden. Much

about him is genuinely likeable and not just because Victorian eccentrics have become fashionable.

But the moral question is left hanging. We should not let the passing show of Ellis's relational life—the absurdity of his being father-confessor to so many women—distract from the deeper morality of his determination to confront directly anomalous sexuality. We know that his advice was sometimes feeble. We know that he could resort to silly game-playing. But there is a saving feature. Ellis went public in the scientist's guise: it was a good strategy, but not without its own ambiguities due to his not being able to say just what was on his mind. Few if any scientists have been capable of revealing their actual starting point, though through the work of Michael Polanyi, we are now nearer to seeing that scientific discovery is a matter of personal participation. The time is approaching when it will not be presumptous for a biographer to say what was driving someone like Ellis who could not say for himself why his mission was so urgent. Ellis's is among the best examples on record of rational enquiry striving to take over from more primitive systems that, if left unmodified, run our lives. In this respect he was certainly more civilized, and more moral, than many of his progeny in the age of permissiveness.

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