

# [Henry Havelock Ellis \(1859-1939\)](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

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Henry [Havelock Ellis](#) <sup>[5]</sup> was born on 2 February 1859 at Croydon in Surrey, England, to Susannah Wheatley Ellis and Edward Peppen Ellis, a sea captain. A psychologist, essayist, and physician, he is best known for his contributions to the study of human sexuality and his support of sex education and women's rights. Ellis's work catalyzed the revolution against repressive Victorian views of sexuality. He was practicing and writing during an era in which attitudes about sex were beginning to change thanks to the activism of several key players in the fight for sexual equality and controlled reproduction. The rise of the more liberal modern approach to human sexuality seen in the first half of the twentieth century is due largely to the efforts of Ellis and other [reproductive rights](#) <sup>[6]</sup> champions like Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes.

Ellis spent much of his youth sailing with his father, taking the first of two trips around the world at the age of seven. After being educated at private schools in South London, he traveled to Australia at the age of sixteen, where he taught at a few schools and as a private tutor over a span of four years before returning to England in 1879. In 1881 he entered St. Thomas's Hospital in London to study medicine, but after a brief stint practicing general medicine he turned his attention to literary, then scientific pursuits.

Ellis wrote constantly throughout his life, publishing everything from literary reviews and articles to the books on sexuality that defined his career. Research for his 1894 book [Man and Woman](#) <sup>[7]</sup> dealt heavily with the topic of human sexuality. His growing interest in sexual behavior ultimately led him to pen [Studies in the Psychology of Sex](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, a comprehensive seven-volume series on a broad range of topics within human sexuality for which he is best known. The seven volumes of the encyclopedia were published over a span of more than thirty years, from 1897–1928, and discussed numerous aspects of sexuality including homosexuality, masturbation, and the physiology of sexuality and sexual arousal. The publication and dissemination of the first volume, [Sexual Inversion](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, incited much opposition in Britain. The firestorm even led to a court case against George Bedborough, owner of a bookstore from which a disguised detective bought a copy, on the grounds that he had participated in the dissemination of obscene material. As a result of the controversy raised in Britain, the remaining six volumes were published in the United States. Some stigma followed the books across the Atlantic, however, and even in the US availability was restricted to members of the medical profession until changes in the obscenity laws in 1935 permitted its sale to the general public.

If the overall subject matter of *Studies* was considered taboo, Ellis's views and conclusions on subtopics of sexuality were even more controversial. *Sexual Inversion*, the first volume of the *Studies*, voiced a highly sympathetic view of homosexuality that had rarely been publicly expressed before. The book consisted primarily of case studies written mainly in first person by successful professionals of the time, all of whom were homosexual. In the second volume, [Auto-Erotism](#) <sup>[10]</sup>, Ellis treated the subject of masturbation with equal objectivity. With the publication of [The Erotic Rights of Women](#) <sup>[11]</sup> in 1918, which depicted women as sexual beings on an equal plane with men, Ellis had tackled Victorian England's trifecta of taboo topics in sexuality. He was motivated in large part by a desire to erase the stigma surrounding public discussion of human sexual behavior, and he viewed education as the cure for the pervasive misunderstandings and misconceptions about sexuality.

Ellis maintained prolific correspondence with many people throughout his life, including several female companions and historic figures Sigmund Freud, [Francis Galton](#) <sup>[12]</sup>, Bertrand Russell, and George Bernard Shaw, among others. Though *Studies* was his most well-known publication, other notable titles include [Man and Woman](#) <sup>[7]</sup> (1894), [The Task of Social Hygiene](#) <sup>[13]</sup> (1912), and [Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students](#) <sup>[14]</sup> (1933). On 19 Dec 1891 he married author [Edith Mary Oldham Lees](#) <sup>[15]</sup>, though the marriage was plagued with infidelity. Lee was a lesbian, as well, and both she and Ellis had affairs with other women throughout their marriage.

[Havelock Ellis](#) <sup>[5]</sup> died of an apparent heart attack on 8 July 1939 in Washbrook, Suffolk, England. His autobiography [My Life](#) <sup>[16]</sup> was published posthumously in 1939. Though the oppressive Victorian views of sexuality were deeply ingrained during his time, his efforts helped open the door for public discourse on sexuality and its intricacies. He was part of a larger social movement developing at the time that was introducing more modern and liberal views about the intertwined issues of human sexuality and reproduction.