

Edwin Abbott Abbott was born in London on 20 December 1838, the fourth child and oldest son of Edwin Abbott, Headmaster of the Philological School, Marylebone. He attended the City of London School and matriculated in 1857 as a scholarship student at St. John's College, Cambridge. He was Senior Classic and Chancellor's Medallist the same year that a CLS classmate, William Steadman Aldis was named Senior Wrangler and Smith's Prizeman. The fact that the top four honors at Cambridge had gone to students at the same school was rare if not unique. The fact that the school was not one of the four top public schools was considered by Lord Carleton as evidence that the traditional dominance of these institutions had broken down.

He earned his B.A. in 1861, specializing in Classics,. He was named a fellow at St. John's College in 1862, from which position he resigned a year later in order to marry Mary Elizabeth Rangeley, who died in 1919 after fifty-six years of marriage. He began his teaching career as Assistant Master at St. Edward's School, and in 1864, he moved to the Clifton School, the same year he received an M.A. from Cambridge. In 1865, at the age of 26, he was chosen to succeed G. W. F. Mortimer as the Headmaster of the City of London School, a position he held for the next 24 years.

He was ordained a deacon in 1862 and a priest a year later. Ten years later, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity, and he was addressed as "Dr. Abbott" from that point onward.

Under his Headmastership, he introduced a number of innovations, including required courses in chemistry and in English literature. As secretary of the Headmasters' Conference, he worked closely with the major educational figures of his day. He was a member of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics (?). He interacted closely with the primary figures in women's education in his day,

including Miss Beale and Miss Buss and the Sheriff sisters. He acted as president of the Teachers' Training Society, dedicated to preparing instructors for preparatory schools for girls, to equip them to take the entrance examinations for the Universities.

Among his distinguished students were Prime Minister H. H. Asquith, Lord Oxford, Bramwell Booth, son of the founder of the Salvation Army, and Sir Israel Gollancz, professor of English Literature at the University of London and co-founder of the British Academy. Although he refused other honors that were offered to him, Abbott accepted membership in the British Academy in 1913.

He had one son, Edwin, who became senior lecturer in classics at Jesus College, Cambridge, and one daughter, Mary, who was at the top of her class in Classics at Girton College, Cambridge, when she left to take care of her ailing parents (who lived 35 more years!) Neither of Abbott's children married and both died in 1952.

Up until his retirement in 1899, Abbott had written more than twenty books. From that point until his death on 26 October 1926, he wrote more than twenty more. His first published work was an introduction to his father's "Concordance of the Works of Alexander Pope". His "Shakespearian Grammar", first published in 1870, went through a large number of editions, as did "How to Write Clearly" and "English Lessons for English People", co-authored with his friend Sir John Seeley. He published two volumes of sermons, delivered respectively at Oxford and Cambridge. He wrote historical volumes on "Bacon and Essex" and "St. Thomas of Canterbury". In his retirement, he produced a thirteen-volume study of the Scriptures entitled "Diatessarica". Still used by scholars of the New Testament philology are his "Johannine Vocabulary" and "Johannine Grammar", largely written with the help of his daughter.

By far his most widely-read and appreciated book was not mentioned at all in his London Times obituary or the entry in the Dictionary of National Biography. Written under the pseudonym A Square, "Flatland" was first published in November 1884, with a second and slightly revised edition appearing a month later. An American reprinting of the first edition was in continuous publication until the 1940s. In 1926, the year that Abbott died, a new British edition was published due to the personal efforts of Sir Basil Blackwell. In 1952, the president of Dover Publications, Hayward Cirker, published a paperback edition that has sold more than one half million copies worldwide. The book has been translated into Dutch, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew, Japanese, Russian, Greek, Arabic, Turkish, Polish, and Catalan. More than a dozen new English language editions have appeared in the past twenty years.

Abbott was a staunch defender of a liberal version of Christianity that falls under the heading of the Broad Church. Already as a schoolboy, he became a parishoner, and a life-long friend of the Reverend John Llewellyn Davies, a strong proponent of the Social Gospel. He corresponded on theological topics with George Eliot, encouraging her to write a non-miraculous version of Christianity, a task that he himself accomplished in three pseudonymous novels, "Philochristus", "Onesimus", and "Silanus". His lecture on "Illusion" at Toynbee Hall shortly after his retirement generated a debate in the London Times between him and Thomas Huxley. His epistolary volume "The Kernel and the Husk" developed further his idea of non-miraculous Christianity, and it drew attacks from conservative Anglican clergy, in particular Bishop Gore.