

Henry Maudsley Introduction to Autobiography

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When he died, on 24 January 1918, Henry Maudsley had long been something of a recluse. His wife, Anne, the youngest daughter of John Conolly, had died some years earlier and he had no children. In his will, signed in November 1914, he had given directions that he should be cremated and that his ashes should be scattered at Golders Green Crematorium, thereby joining those of his wife. At that time, cremation was still an unusual method of dealing with one's remains. Nevertheless, it accorded very much with Maudsley's own philosophies and principles. As George Savage wrote, in an obituary article in 1918, "to the outside world he appeared to be a materialist and a pessimist, with no basis of any religious faith; yet I have known him repudiate the accusation of being opposed or antagonistic to religion." Other obituarists commented on his "hypercritical manner", his tartness, and his pessimism. Even Savage agreed that "Maudsley, as he appeared to others, was cynical and rather unfriendly; a man who seemed to prefer solitude and contemplation to social life" (Savage, 1918).

Despite his many writings and voluminous works of philosophy and psychiatry, very little is known about Henry Maudsley himself. It seems likely that he destroyed most of his private papers, and in one of his last works, *Religion and Realities* (1918), he wrote, "comical, almost pitiful at times is the ludicrous display of vanity by men of great eminence . . . they leave behind them carefully preserved letters and elaborate memoirs of what they thought and felt." Nevertheless, in his researches for the 25th Maudsley Lecture, Sir Aubrey Lewis did come across a handwritten document which seems to be Henry Maudsley's attempted autobiography. It was apparently written in 1912, for distribution amongst his family. Retained in the archives of the Bethlem Royal and Maudsley Joint Hospitals, it seems to have remained largely unnoticed. Perhaps this is understandable since no one has attempted a detailed biography of Henry Maudsley, despite his legendary status and the fame of the hospital named after him. The lecture delivered by Lewis in 1951 is admirable in its way, but largely the work of a spiritual disciple, who praised Maudsley for his scepticism, his

erudition and the quality of his written work. Lewis is particularly hard on Dr Gregory Zilboorg, who had reckoned "the classificatory effort of Maudsley appears unenlightened; were it not for his insistence on careful historical studies of each individual patient, one could not easily discern the human being behind the classificatory frame" (Zilboorg & Henry, 1941). Lewis also recommended that trainee psychiatrists today would benefit from reading Maudsley, but a brief glimpse at the latter's convoluted and wordy style may deter many potential readers.

The autobiography itself largely deals with Maudsley's early life and antecedents. His bent towards the importance of genetics is shown by his comments on the "emotional quality of my maternal stock", and his belief that he had not died of apoplexy because of sound arteries related to "my paternal texture". Towards the end of the piece he writes about his "paternal judgement censoring . . . maternal impulsion", and goes on to the much quoted saying that "the paternal and maternal were never vitally *welded* in me, but only *rivetted*." This concentration on his background and ancestral stock fully accords with Maudsley's belief in the importance of inheritance both in health and disease. He became a particular supporter of the theory of degeneration, attending Galton's lectures on eugenics in his later life.

His description of his student days is rather quirky, but there seems little doubt that he had an extraordinary memory, such as would now be called photographic, as was confirmed by Savage (1918): "he said he had an unusual visual memory, and that if asked a question he seemed to be able to copy the answer from a textbook. There is no doubt he had a wonderful memory, and he was always ready with quotations from Shakespeare, the Bible and from certain poets."

Yet the most intriguing aspect of the fragment of autobiography that we are left with is the absence of any detail of his working life. For after three years at the Manchester Royal Lunatic Asylum at Cheadle, as Medical Superintendent, in 1862 he suddenly became "restless and desirous of change, resigned my appointment and threw myself on London, without any definite notion of what I should do there." Three paragraphs then sum up the rest of

his life, and the longest of these, the last one, largely describes events from 1907 when he and Frederick Mott were negotiating a site for a new hospital for the early treatment of mental disease, to which Maudsley had contributed £30 000. The 45-odd years in between these two events was apparently “spent in getting such practice in lunacy as I could, which increased gradually, and in writing the books which I have published in succession.” The fact that he had edited the *Journal of Mental Science* for many years (1862–1878), had been President of the Medico-Psychological Association (MPA) in 1870, had written an extremely influential textbook (*The Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, 1867) are not even hinted at. Perhaps this was because, as outlined by Sir James Crichton-Browne in his First Maudsley Lecture (1920), he led a life “prosperous and uneventful” and was “retiring and shy of publicity”. Perhaps there are more practical reasons for this strange omission. For example, when he died he was extremely wealthy, and it seems likely that he cornered the aristocratic market. Furthermore, in 1890 his name was no longer recorded among the list of members of the Medico-Psychological Association. Although subsequently made an Honorary Fellow, in 1912, there seems little doubt that Maudsley became isolated from the regulars of the psychiatric profession.

Nevertheless, the autobiography does give us a brief glimpse of the personality behind the massive ideology that Henry Maudsley represents to the modern eye. For whatever the disagreement that led to his break from mainstream psychiatry, he did atone generously with his gift for the founding of the present Maudsley Hospital, and further gifts to the MPA in his will. He did insist on research and a scientific basis to the understanding of psychological disorders, even though his own materialist philosophy was often obscure and unhelpful. All the obituaries speak of the affection in which he was held by several individuals, despite his personal isolation, and throughout his life he was virulently opposed to forced treatments, such as restraint or the excessive use of stomach pumps, and bravely defended

criminal lunatics against capital punishment. Nevertheless, his inability to suffer fools gladly, and the obscurity surrounding much of his career, remain problematic in any detailed assessment of his true influence. Thus when a fellow physician wrote to him and reminded him of some incidents during the time when he, Maudsley, had been House Surgeon to Mr Quain, Maudsley replied, somewhat abruptly, in an open postcard (Brown, 1922), “a man who has such a memory for detail as you appear to have ought to be buried in his back garden”.

Date of writing

Earlier in the piece Maudsley states that he is now 72 years old, which would place the writing at about 1907. The details appended in the last paragraph describe later events, which seems to indicate that it was added at a later date.

References

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