
Obituary



Professor Sir William Trethowan CBE

Bill Trethowan's talents could have brought him success in enterprises as diverse as music, ambassadorial service, natural history, and haute cuisine. Fortunately medicine and psychiatry were to be the leading beneficiaries. Through the breadth of his vision he made a resounding impact on the two universities in which he headed departments, while on the national scene and overseas he became a statesman of medicine.

He was born on 3 June 1917. His father, an orthopaedic surgeon at Guys, and famed for his musical evenings at his home in Hampstead, died of pneumonia when Bill was 16, and thereupon his mother enrolled at the Royal Free Hospital, qualifying on the same day as her son.

After school at Oundle, Bill went up to Cambridge. There, he headed immediately for the Footlights Club, and became familiar to all as conductor, orchestrator, pianist, jazz trumpeter, and eventually musical director. He formed his own orchestra, the Arrhythmiatheans, which played at the Festival Theatre and accompanied Pam Waters, a young actress fresh out of LAMDA, who sang in cabaret. Bill and Pam shone brightly in the Cambridge firmament: these hectic and glamorous years came to an abrupt end in September 1939 when the Cambridge Festival

Theatre lights went out, along with those of the rest of Europe. Bill started his clinical studies at Guys in that month; he and Pam married two years later.

Trethowan qualified at Guys in 1943 and joined the RAMC, serving in Belgium and the Punjab, and becoming a medical specialist with the rank of major. Demobilised in 1947, he started his psychiatric training as a Maudsley registrar, and spent two years as a research worker at Massachusetts General Hospital and honorary teaching fellow at Harvard. In 1951 he was appointed lecturer, later senior lecturer, in the department of psychiatry in Manchester University, where he came under the influence of the scholarly and eccentric Professor E. W. Anderson, with whom he broadened his interests in psychopathology and established himself as a clinician and teacher. Appointment to the chair of psychiatry at the University of Sydney followed in 1956.

On reaching New South Wales, Trethowan discovered that provisions for mentally ill people were governed by the grim and antiquated Lunacy Act of 1898. Facilities for voluntary patients and early treatment were almost non-existent. The mentally ill were consigned to mental hospitals and "reception houses", overcrowded and insanitary, where shortage of professional staff precluded serious attempts at treatment. Trethowan was outspoken in his condemnation. He denounced official and public attitudes towards mental illness and avidly accepted invitations to talk, and keep talking, at public meetings, on the radio, and to the newspapers. Soon he was appointed to a three-man expert committee to reform the Lunacy Act. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* leading article for 22 October 1957 gave credit to Trethowan for ensuring that the mentally ill in NSW would in future benefit from "the revolutionary advances during recent years in diagnosing and treating mental disorders". Thereafter he was able to develop services and teaching programmes for medical students and trainee psychiatrists.

Bill's musical versatility was still exercised: at Manchester he conducted Purcell's *King Arthur* and played the piano at plays and revues which Pam directed. His trumpet playing was relatively neglected but on more than one occasion, caught without his instrument, he had recourse to solos on the tubular furniture, producing a most remarkable sound. At Sydney he was again hailed as a brilliant pianist: the Trethowan duo wrote and produced the floor show for the medical ball

and like occasions, and Pam produced plays of Beckett, Anouilh and Pinter.

The University of Birmingham was eager to establish a chair of psychiatry and, hearing Trethowan cited as a "godsend" who was rumoured to be a restless spirit, alerted its emissaries. He was appointed to the foundation chair in 1962, fortified by promises of a purpose-built unit which materialised well after his retirement. Nevertheless he stayed in Birmingham for the rest of his career, despite the blandishments of a school of the University of London. He first concentrated on developing postgraduate education in psychiatry in the territory of the Birmingham Regional Hospital Board. Antagonisms between teaching and regional hospitals had been all too evident throughout Britain, especially in psychiatry, but soon the region's mental hospitals were sending their junior staff to courses at the centre, and also developing their own facilities for teaching, and Trethowan and his senior lecturer were regular visitors at each hospital. His colleagues in the medical faculty were charmed by his lucidity, straightforwardness, and grasp of current issues facing medicine in general. He was trusted, admired, envied, and in due course elected Dean of the Faculty in 1968, holding that office for six years. He is remembered as a radical Dean, who reorganised the committee structure to open up the decision-making processes, and introduced continuous assessment for medical students. He saw the faculty surmount the trials of the strange period of student unrest which crossed Europe, the growth of serious financial problems affecting medical schools and health services, and the successive reorganisations of the NHS. He developed a detailed understanding of the shifting patterns of relationships between medical schools, teaching hospitals, and the emerging district general hospitals, and his reputation as a statesman of medicine grew with his increasing involvement on the national scene.

For long periods during the years 1964 to 1982 he was consultant adviser in psychiatry to the DHSS, and a member, often chairman, of several standing committees. He was a member (later treasurer) of the General Medical Council, and a member of the Medical Committee of the University Grants Committee. A gifted and far-sighted man who relished hard work, Trethowan was formidable as a tactician as well as a strategist. The managerial revolution, with its now all too familiar hierarchies and rituals, was yet to erupt. In those days people like Trethowan were there, senior members of the medical profession, trusted by their colleagues and relied upon to give sound and sensible advice to ministers and civil servants.

Among his specific tasks, none was more important than his chairmanship of the sub-

committee appointed in 1972 to consider the role of psychologists in the health services. With the expansion of psychological knowledge and the development of new techniques, it had gradually become clear to all that psychologists had a very great deal more than hitherto to contribute to psychiatry in particular, and to medicine generally. Effectively a new professional discipline had developed within the NHS, and this raised extensive problems concerning clinical responsibility, career structure, and the organisation of services. A very large number of individuals and organisations submitted evidence to the committee whose official report was published in 1977. It was a triumph: the recommendations were welcomed by all, and the ensuing arrangements are still in force, admirably serving their purpose.

In the 1960s there was a growing feeling in the Royal Medico-Psychological Association and elsewhere in the profession that a Royal College of Psychiatrists should be created. This opinion was by no means unanimous. A number of senior psychiatrists, including Trethowan, had a strong belief in the unity of medicine, and took the view that psychiatry should remain closely associated with general medicine, with its professional and academic interests represented by a Faculty of the Royal College of Physicians. Ultimately the majority view was that the RMPA should petition the Privy Council for a charter as a Royal College. Trethowan was persuaded, and became a member of the special committee which laboured over the multitudinous problems to draft the petition. When the Royal College was formed he became its first Chief Examiner (1971-74) and worked out the details of the examination, which in all essentials served the College for its first decade.

It was hardly surprising that in 1976 the Chinese University of Hong Kong chose Trethowan to be chairman of the advisory committee to establish the new medical school. Starting from scratch, he steered this very ambitious project to its completion and success ten years later.

Trethowan published some 80 papers, mostly covering a range of subjects in psychopathological and educational topics. He was particularly fascinated by rare disorders and shortly after his arrival in Birmingham carried out a controlled study which validated the couvade syndrome and explored its relation to the ritual couvade described by social anthropologists. Accounts of this and other important oddities of psychopathology later became the basis of a successful book *Uncommon Psychiatric Syndromes*, by Trethowan, Enoch and Barker. He also took over from E. W. Anderson the authorship of *Psychiatry*, a textbook principally for medical students. This from its first edition attracted a substantial readership because of its concise and reliable presentation of the essentials of the subject. In due course he secured its

future by passing on the authorship to Andrew Sims.

Trethowan was a large man, his features stern in repose. At times he might look fierce, and a tendency to melancholy could now and then mask the fact that he was a resourceful conversationalist, and generous spirit and a most agreeable companion, the humour never far away. His interests in natural history were exemplified by the marvellous butterfly collection he had put together. His fascination with music converged with his professional interests when, late in his career and after retirement, he lectured and wrote about Ivor Gurney, the musician and poet who developed paranoid schizophrenia, and about aspects of musical composition illustrated by the lives and works of Elgar and Finzi.

In Manchester, Sydney and Birmingham, Bill and Pam led a lively home life with their three children. Over the years colleagues and guests were introduced to a liberal, disputatious, restless, heartwarming and free-thinking household. Bill retired in 1982. His enjoyment of a more leisurely pace was marred by Pam's long illness, and she died three years later. There followed a time of great sadness, but in 1988 he married Heather Dalton, and with her relished seven years' pursuit of happiness at home and abroad, a period of mature reflection ended only by a disagreeable but mercifully short final illness. He died on 15 December 1995.

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