

In the Beginning

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In commemorating the 25th anniversary of the British Journal of Psychiatry it is fitting to trace its history to its beginnings, *The Asylum Journal*, which made its bow on 15 November 1853. The publication of the *Journal* was a landmark, the prime importance of which can only be appreciated in the context of the history of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. The College itself is descended in direct line from The Association of Medical Officers of Asylums and Hospitals for the Insane, which under different titles has a continuous existence for more than 140 years, and can legitimately claim to be the oldest medical society in its field in the world.

The original Association was the brain-child of Dr Samuel Hitch, Resident Superintendent of the Gloucestershire General Lunatic Asylum. In a circular letter, dated 19 June 1841, addressed to visiting physicians and resident superintendents of 26 asylums and hospitals in England, 7 in Scotland and 11 in Ireland, he suggested that an association of medical gentlemen connected with lunatic asylums be formed. The opening paragraph of his letter is well worth quoting, because the aims and objects of the proposed associations are in essence the same as those subscribed to by today's Royal College. It reads:

“It has been long felt desirable that the medical gentlemen connected with lunatic asylums should be better known to each other – shall communicate more freely the results of their individual experience – should co-operate in collecting statistical information relating to insanity – and, above all, should assist each other in improving the treatment of the insane. . . .”

This was a bold, ambitious declaration, but the fulfilment of what it sets out to do could only be realised if the means of communication were assured. To this end it was decided at the York meeting of the newly established association in 1844 to publish a journal, although there was to be a 9-year period of gestation between its conception and its birth.

At this time the attendance at annual meetings of the fledgling association remained small, for the simple reason that it was either difficult or impossible for members to desert their asylums or hospitals, which so often they ran single-handed. The *Journal*,

once established, became, therefore, for so many members marooned in their institutions, the sole means of communication, the ‘glue’ which bound the association together. The *Journal* was singularly fortunate in having as its first editor the dynamic Dr John (later Sir John) Bucknill of Exeter, who continued in office for the next 10 years. It was he, incidentally, who was responsible for the alteration of the title from the modest original to the much more ambitious *Journal of Mental Science*. This title remained until 1963 when the journal assumed today's title, *The British Journal of Psychiatry*.

The contents of the first issue of the *Asylum Journal*, 16 pages in all, are a bit of a hotchpotch. Two of the nine papers reflect the contemporary hazards to which patients (and staff) in mental hospitals were exposed, namely, dysenteric diarrhoea and cholera. A further two papers give the issue a cosmopolitan flavour; there is an abridged version of a paper on monomania translated from the French, and a most disparaging comment by Professor Albers of Bonn on the “so-called non-restraint system”. This infuriates Dr Bucknill who lets the learned Professor have both barrels of his editorial shotgun. “. . . Physical force pervades the country (Germany); and it would, indeed, be folly to expect the merits of the non-restraint system should be recognized where even the sane of the community are drilled into order by soldiery and the police”.

The issue is overwhelmingly the product of the style and pen of the editor: at least 9 of the 16 pages are written by him. The passage quoted above is an example of him at his most vitriolic. But there is another lengthy paper entitled “On the head dress of pauper lunatic men”, written, it is fair to assume, with a wry sense of the ridiculous. Be this as it may, the paper is in itself a delightful social commentary focused on the importance of the correct head-dress for, in the first instance, “the man of business and of pleasure”. Bucknill observes, “Besides the regulation pot, as the Musselman call the Frankish hat, he has his yachting oilskin, his cricketing straw, his travelling cap, to say nothing of his gossamer, gibus, and crush”. The pauper lunatic, on the other hand, at the other extreme of the social scale, is not troubled with such niceties of choice; he is obliged

"SI QUID NOVISTI, RECTIUS ISTIS,
"CANDIDUS IMPERTI, SI NON, HIS UTERE MECUM."

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PROSPECTUS.

FROM the time when Pinel obtained the permission of Couthon to try the humane experiment of releasing from fetters some of the insane citizens chained to the dungeon walls of the Bicêtre, to the date when Conolly announced, that in the vast Asylum over which he presided, mechanical restraint in the treatment of the insane had been entirely abandoned, and superseded by moral influence, a new school of special medicine has been gradually forming.

That period which is marked in the annals of France as the Reign of Terror, saw the star of hope arise over the living sepulchre of the lunatic. Pinel vindicated the rights of science against the usurpations of superstition and brutality; and rescued the victims of cerebro-mental disease from the exorcist and the gaoler. But the victory was not gained in one battle; the struggle was carried on with undulating success, until in this country the good work was definitely consummated by the labors of Conolly.

The Physician is now the responsible guardian of the lunatic, and must ever remain so,

unless by some calamitous reverse the progress of the world in civilization should be arrested and turned back in the direction of practical barbarism. Since the public in all civilized countries have recognized the fact, that Insanity lies strictly within the domain of medical science, new responsibilities and new duties have devolved upon those who have devoted themselves to its investigation and treatment. Many circumstances have tended, not indeed to isolate cerebro-mental disease from the mainland of general pathology; but to render prominent its characteristics and to stamp it as a specialty.

When *The Citizen of the World* exclaimed, "Is the animal machine less complicated than a brass pin? Not less than ten different hands are required to make a pin, and shall the body be set right by one single operator?" he forgot that "the physician who pretends to cure disorders in the lump," does not pretend to *make* the animal machine, but only to set it to rights when it may be somewhat out of repair. The division, however, of medical science into the numerous specialities at present existing, may in some respects be expellient, but in others cannot fail to be disadvantageous. The

to wear whatever a paternalistic and economy-conscious medical superintendent designs for him. "A good choice is the more necessary when the habiliment is to cover a head containing a brain morbidly diseased, liable to any noxious influence, and, on account of blunted sensation or perception, often incapable of recognising such influence", explains Bucknill, glancing down his patrician nose. He goes on to discuss the ideal headgear for the lunatic male and comes down firmly in favour of a cap made of fustian or of light-coloured cloth, shaped like the forage cap used by officers in the army. He allows that fustians of all kinds are fated to become "washed out", but he adds with air of considerable authority, "When it becomes white the appearance is perhaps a little odd, but it is smart and cleanly looking. Its weight is 4½ oz, its costs, home made, 7d"!

In sharp contrast there is a vitally important leading article, headed, "Prospectus", which Bucknill certainly means to be taken very seriously indeed. Its main purpose is to demand recognition for psychiatry as a specialty. "Many circumstances have tended, not indeed to isolate cerebro-mental disease from the mainland of general pathology, but to render prominent its characteristics and to stamp it as a specialty", he writes persuasively. He quotes at length from Feuchtersleben (*sic*) whose "The Principles of Medical Psychology", translated from the German in 1847, had a profound effect on the development of psychiatric thought in Europe (Bucknill's copy is in the College library). Feuchtersleben makes clear the prerequisites of the psychiatric physician (the first use of the term 'psychiatric' in English writing) which are so specialised as to demand a second education. He amplifies his belief:

"He must be able by his personal demeanour to obtain influence over the minds of other men . . . without which mental diseases, however thoroughly understood, cannot be successfully treated" – about as clear a statement of the mechanism whereby the successful psychotherapist operates as can be wished for.

Bucknill goes on to make an impassioned appeal for the recognition of the mental hospitals as the only fitting place for the treatment and study of cerebro-mental diseases. "District hospitals for the insane are not less a medical than a social necessity of the times", he proclaims. He supports his contention by chastising "medical societies and ephemeral books" for their "crude theories of insanity, founded on the observation of a few isolated cases (which) are propounded with all the positiveness of inexperience". He ends his Prospectus on a business-like note: "The issue of the Journal will at first take place once in six weeks, or at the semiquarterly periods; a less frequent issue having been thought incompatible with its mission as a means of intercommunication between asylum officers. Should it be found upon trial that this interval is too great, it will be readily shortened."

There is a final plea. "We have only to beg the kind support of our brother officers; to promise a conscientious discharge of the responsible duties we have undertaken, and to begin". The plea was apparently heeded. A second edition of the first issue had to be printed to meet the demand. The first issue of the *Asylum Journal* was not in all honesty an outstanding achievement, but it was a beginning; and what the subsequent history of the Journal and its successors illustrates so clearly is how mighty things from small beginnings can grow.

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