

Aubrey Lewis: The Making of a Psychiatrist*

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Earlier this year I was invited by the American Psychiatric Association to deliver a public lecture on the contributions of Sir Aubrey Lewis to psychiatry, with particular reference to his work in its historical perspective (Shepherd, 1977). By a happy chance the lecture in question is linked with the name of Adolf Meyer, an eponymous association which facilitated the exposition of the principal theme of my address. It was, I believe, Manfred Bleuler who first drew attention to the similarities between Adolf Meyer and Aubrey Lewis despite profound differences in their temperament and background (Bleuler, 1966). In retrospect it is now apparent that Lewis was Meyer's natural successor, both men standing out as the representative psychiatrist of his generation in the mainstream of psychiatry, each owing his pre-eminence as much to what he stood for as to what he achieved. This was the argument which I did my best to elaborate, drawing for the purpose on the sources and development of Sir Aubrey's ideas, on his manifold achievements and on the various legacies which he has bestowed to his own successors. And, since I was addressing a largely North American audience to whom he was a somewhat remote figure, I attempted to introduce my subject with a few words about the origins and character of the man himself.

It has since been brought to my attention that some of this personal information is not generally known and might be of interest in its own right. It seems that to many, if not most, of his professional colleagues Aubrey

Lewis emerged in 1929, when he accepted a post as medical officer at the Maudsley Hospital. From that time onwards his career is well enough documented, but he was then nearly 30 years of age and one might, with due propriety, be entitled to a little curiosity about the antecedents of so remarkable a man.

Yet, while it was understandable that the Royal College of Psychiatrists should regard the subject as suitable for this Memorial Meeting, I found myself wondering what Sir Aubrey himself would have made of the proposal. As a profoundly reserved man who always respected privacy in others, he would not, I suspect, have welcomed anything that smacked of unwarranted prying or intrusion for its own sake, and one shudders at the thought of his reaction to any attempt at justification in the name of some such fashionable catch-phrase as 'psychological understanding'. On the other hand, as a very rational man he would assuredly have been open to persuasion by any reasonable argument indicating possible benefit to others. And one such argument suggests itself at once. Throughout his professional life Sir Aubrey was at all times an educator who was much concerned with the problems of recruitment into psychiatry, more especially with quality rather than quantity. In this regard he was constantly concerned with the key issue, still faced by everyone who sits on selection-committees, of how to identify the promising young psychiatrist by some more rational means than trial and error. One way of approaching this question, of course, is to examine the characteristics of individuals who do well in the specialty. Since by any standards Sir Aubrey did very well indeed, we may be able to learn something about the makings of a psychiatrist from his

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own development. Accordingly, I shall try to delineate some of the distinguishing characteristics of the young Aubrey Lewis which may illuminate the nature and direction of his subsequent career.

Early Years

He was born in 1900, the only child of Jewish parents, his father having emigrated from London in the 1890s to earn his living in a small watch-making and repairing business in the city of Adelaide in South Australia. His mother was a local teacher of elocution and the family was a respected part of the small Adelaide Jewish community. Their son is said to have been unable to read until the age of 7. If so, he made up for this tardy development so rapidly as to have produced a prize essay entitled 'My Favourite Season, Spring', three years later. To the best of my knowledge this was his first publication, and it appeared in the local newspaper, the *Southern Cross*. It is lucidly constructed, beginning with a quotation from Longfellow and concluding with one from Tennyson, and its most significant sentence reads as follows: 'I am an Australian, and my essay is from an Australian point of view, which is not, perhaps, in concord with that of others who dwell on other parts of this great planet.'

By this time the boy's intellectual precocity was so apparent that his parents felt it necessary to procure for him the best schooling in the locality. This was to be found in a Catholic school, the Christian Brothers' College. Here his talents were quickly appreciated, especially by the College Literary Society. In 1911 the following entry appeared in the College magazine: 'The judge specially complimented Master Aubrey Lewis who, as an honorary member, made his first appearance, and, without notes of any kind discussed Shakespeare and his works with agreeable delivery and wonderful fluency.'

This was the harbinger of a regular series of references, exemplified by the following:

1912: 'Master Aubrey Lewis gave a number of very complete character sketches as studies from Dickens, and showed more than a nodding acquaintance with the "inhabitants" of "Bleak House".'

1913: 'Mr. A. Lewis made the loftiest flight of the evening, introducing the great Belgian philosopher, Maeterlinck, and giving a short account of some of his literary masterpieces.'

1914: 'The most instructive speech of the evening was a lecture by Mr. A. Lewis on Bacon and Shakespeare, which included a convincing refutation of the various theories put forward in favour of Bacon and others to the authorship of Shakespeare's immortal works.'

1915: 'Mr. Lewis' discourse on the origin and history of words was most instructive from a philological point of view, but rather too technical for the occasion.'

And, in 1916, perhaps the most intriguing of all:

'Mr. A. Lewis told to attentive hearers the weird story of Faust, and introduced Mephistopheles for the first time to the Society.'

This is, I suspect, the earliest recorded example of his ability to put the cat among the pigeons!

In 1917, by which time he had been elected President of the Literary Society, it is recorded that Mr Lewis was made the recipient of 'an address beautifully mounted on a silk bannerette, suspended from a tastefully carved rosewood rod and ornamented with ecclesiastical trimmings'. On it was printed those forward-looking words: 'Your good example during your years here has been a constant incentive to better efforts on the part of your fellow-members, and your pleasing versatility in literary matters has been a source of inspiration for us all.'

The Student

In that same year he entered Adelaide University after a brilliant academic career at school. It may be noted that his pass-subjects were Latin, Greek, French, German, English Literature, History and Mathematics. No mention here of science, yet he was to enter the Faculty of Medicine. Why should he have chosen to do so? I have been quite unable to obtain a satisfactory answer to this question, and can only speculate. In Britain at this time a boy of these attainments would surely have read English or classics or modern languages or history at one of the ancient universities—

probably, I would guess, at Balliol College, Oxford—with a distinguished academic, legal or civil service career before him. Aubrey Lewis, however—as that early essay made clear—was the self-conscious product of an Australian upbringing, and his choice of career may well have been motivated by the attitude summed up by a shrewd observer of the Australian scene in the early years of the century: ‘In Australia, when any boy with fire (or plain inconsequence) in his belly decides to take up teaching, which is grossly underpaid, or politics, or the theatre, let alone painting or poetry or the public service, he is thought more than a little strange.’

The medical profession was evidently not considered strange, certainly not at the Adelaide Medical School where, during his years as a medical student, we learn a little of the fires burning within Mr Aubrey Lewis as a prominent member of the Medical Students’ Society to which he made a number of contributions. Shortly after he began his medical studies an anonymous correspondent made the following comment: ‘Mr. A. J. Lewis read a paper which proved to be perhaps the finest ever heard by the Medical Students’ Society. His quick touches of humour, quiet sarcasm, balanced judgement, and above all the brilliant style in which it was written, only go to show how great has been Medicine’s gain, and we must hope this will not prove to be Literature’s loss.’

Fortunately, that essay is still extant. It was entitled ‘Quacks’, and it contains several extracts worth quoting on this occasion: ‘The stronghold, the almost impregnable fortress of the quack is one built not by himself, but by his dupes; and its name is human credulity. So long as men are willing to believe a thing to be true, although their reason adjudges it false, so long will the quack flourish. He knows well wherein his strength consists; the scientific attitude of mind, scepticism if you like, is the one thing that he dreads. . . .’

‘[For a physician] an open mind is one of the most precious qualities we can be endowed with . . . one almost feels inclined to say, *pace tanti vidi*, that the right time to pole-axe a man, especially a doctor, has come as soon as he shows signs of believing that whatever he learns, whatever he does, whatever he thinks must be right

and that all who disagree should be put down; in short, as soon as he has the symptoms of that form of scientific senility which is called obscurantism.’

‘Understandably, perhaps, the quack flourishes nowhere more than in the field of nervous diseases. Psychological medicine, fraught as it is with great possibilities, is only young as yet, and perhaps some day faith cures (and related observations) will cease to be the puzzling yet well-authenticated phenomena that they are at present.’ This is, fittingly enough, the first recorded reference to his future vocation which I have been able to detect.

During his student years Aubrey Lewis served as assistant editor to the Society’s journal under another able student with a bright future, H. W. Florey, before taking over the editorial chair. As editors tend to do, he made a number of contributions to his own journal, and here I would single out his editorial on the Value of Literacy, written at the age of 20, which tells us in the following passage a little of how he sought to combine the two cultures in later life: ‘A doctor’, he wrote, ‘must know human nature . . . literary art in a similar way seeks to annotate and illumine the difficult book of human nature, so that we read clearly by its light what had else been dimly seen and doubtfully construed. It might be argued that this is really the function of psychology, but the difference between literature and psychology is the difference between ‘King Lear’ and an essay on ‘Filial Ingratitude’. Both, though very different, will be of value to the student of human nature.’

‘The confidence and respect of patients is essential to a doctor. To this end he must be not only a skilful surgeon or physician, but a gentleman and—in my view the terms are synonymous—a man of culture. It may be said that the qualities of a gentleman are not to be acquired. Supposing it to be otherwise, the example and friendship of gentlemen may do much to make a man a gentleman himself, and it is chiefly by means of literature that we can gain access to their lives and conversation. Close association with such gentlemen as Charles Lamb and Marcus Aurelius, Uncle Toby and Colonel Newcome—who could not add a score

such names?—does not leave a man as it found him; it is a rein upon the headlong, a spur to the clean spirit; and we reject it at our peril.’

Into Psychiatry

After graduating with honours in 1923, Aubrey Lewis was appointed resident medical officer of the Adelaide Hospital where he later became medical and surgical registrar. It was during this period that he undertook his first piece of research, an anthropological study of the aborigines of South Australia which included physical measurements, implements, songs, vocabulary and psychological observations. In a paper read to the Royal Society of South Australia in 1926 he pointed out the need for training in research for anthropology, and later that year he was awarded a Rockefeller Travelling Fellowship for medical research, specified ‘for study in psychological medicine, nervous diseases, etc., with the special object of training the holder for studying the mental traits of the Australian aborigine’. Here is the story in his own words: ‘I think my entry into psychiatry was fortuitous. I was at a University where there was a great deal of interest at that time in anthropological research because the aborigines were clearly a vanishing race and people wanted to make as many observations as they could on them at that time. The presence of Wood Jones, an anatomist with wide interests who was particularly concerned with anthropology, contributed to stirring up the interest of people like myself. So I seized the opportunity of going on one or two expeditions and collecting some data concerning the dreams of aborigines, many of whom came into the hospital where I was at the time a student or a houseman. When two emissaries of the Rockefeller Foundation came to Adelaide to look for people who might be trained to make psychological observations of the aborigines, because up till then the anthropological studies in this field had not been psychometric, they were told of my existence and they asked me whether I would like to have training as a psychologist in order to equip me to study the aborigines in detail. I agreed, though I recognized that it was in a sense wasting my medical education for me now to start on a fresh career as a research psychologist.

Until then I had always thought of myself as having a bent towards neurology, and I thought of myself as following the usual Australian sequence of coming to England, obtaining the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians, and then more neurology at Queen Square and finally acquiring a practice as a specialist. However, this advent of the Rockefeller men of course deflected me, and it was agreed that I should have a training as a psychologist. Then difficulties arose because the Professor of Psychology in my university was really a philosopher and he had no liking or, indeed, any tolerance of the kind of psychology he knew was practised in America—academic experimental psychology instead of metaphysics which he saw as the real business of the psychologist—so he refused to guarantee me a place in the University in his department on my return. This was the obvious way of arranging things in accordance with the usual requirements of the Rockefeller Foundation, that the University from which a man came should be prepared to give him a job on completion of his training. When the predicament was explained to the Rockefeller people they said they were prepared to transfer my Fellowship from psychology to psychiatry. And so when I went to America it was to departments of psychiatry that I went. In a sense, therefore, I suppose I was not taking up psychiatry because it was my aim and ambition and purpose in life at that time but because it was fairly close to some other interests of mine which happened to fit in with the opportunity that was suddenly thrust before me, an opportunity of going abroad and getting the further experience I was likely to obtain if I had the Fellowship. But from then on, of course, I was psychiatrically corralled’ (Lewis, 1967).

There was no mentor, no master to guide Aubrey Lewis in the earliest stages of his psychiatric tutelage. So he followed his own nose, finding all he needed in the next two years, first in the United States working with Macfie Campbell in Boston and Adolf Meyer at Baltimore, then with Gordon Holmes at Queen Square, and finally in Germany, at Heidelberg with Karl Beringer and at the Charité in Berlin with Karl Bonhoeffer. By the time he returned

to Australia in 1928 he was committed to psychiatry. Then, when it was made clear that opportunities would not be made available, he left the country of his birth, settled in England and eventually joined the staff of the Maudsley Hospital in 1929.

How did he strike his medical contemporaries in these early days? Not many are still alive, but I have received a number of letters from several who recall him at the time. Most of them mention his erudition, his integrity, his capacity for hard work and the respect in which he was held by his colleagues. One of them goes a little further: 'Even as a young man Aubrey was never easy to know, but when one got beneath his reserve (or was it his shyness?) one discovered an unexpected warmth, humour and sympathy which was belied by his outward manner.' These words clearly anticipate the comment made 40 years later by the late Professor Peter Baan, who described Sir Aubrey publicly as a man whose keen mind and sharp tongue concealed a very kind heart.

What, then, can we learn from these sketchy facts which might help us to evaluate the *curriculum vitae* of a young man or woman with an interest in psychiatry? First, an endorsement of James Boswell's dictum that 'The boy is the man in miniature, and the distinguishing characteristics of each individual are the same through the whole course of his life.' All we know of Sir Aubrey's early years and his subsequent career bear out the truth of this statement. Secondly, a confirmation of the conclusions which he himself drew from the comparably tangential entry of Henry Maudsley into the psychiatric arena: 'I think it is worth pausing to consider whether we are not in danger nowadays of becoming hidebound in our demands upon every aspirant, whatever his talents and pro-

mise; no doubt our requirements are the safe and right ones for the majority of candidates, but we have no great cause to preen ourselves on our skill in selection or our readiness to back a winner when we make comparison with our staid forefathers of a hundred years ago. . . . The range and content of psychiatry have been much extended in the last 100 years; but it is still, I think, true that a man of exceptional powers can acquaint himself in a few years of concentrated observation, reading and reflection with all the current knowledge he needs and can use, while the rest of us work our way steadily through the appointed stages of a lengthy training. . . . Our difficulty, obviously, lies in knowing how to distinguish between the slick, hasty smatterer claiming privilege, and the impatient man with an original mind, fertile, selective and independent' (Lewis, 1951).

Such men are rare in any field. Unfortunately all too few have been drawn to psychiatry, where their importance cannot be overestimated. Indeed, at the present time it can be maintained that the future of the discipline as a major branch of medicine depends on its ability to recruit them in sufficient numbers. The protasis of Aubrey Lewis's career raises challenging questions for the many colleagues who have profited from his achievements and his example.

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