

# REFLECTIONS ON “A HUNDRED YEARS AGO”, A VALEDICTORY IN THREE PARTS

BY HENRY ROLLIN

1

Astute readers will have observed my “fillers” for the British Journal of Psychiatry entitled “One Hundred Years Ago”, which have comprised extracts on psychiatric matters from contemporaneous accounts at the end of the nineteenth century. In 2003, I reflected on my readings and concluded that the “composite picture in Britain at the end of the Victorian era is chiefly one of unremitting gloom”. As I take my leave of writing I have not changed my mind on this, but am putting forward some additional material both to support the idea and to indicate some of the emergent themes that were to lead to different approaches in the following century.

## **The Fate of the Dream Palaces**

The reformers of the mid-nineteenth century hoped that the compulsory building of county asylums with good conditions and humane treatment in ideal settings would lead in and of itself to the cure of insanity. However, the Grand Design of the reformers was frustrated by burgeoning industrialisation and concomitant urbanisation bringing in its train an unparalleled increase in the birth-rate and growth in the number of officially identified lunatics to well over 86,000. In consequence, many lunatics ended up incarcerated in workhouses or prisons. So appalling did the situation become that action was demanded, and the solution was – build more lunatic asylums. This was described in the *Journal of Mental Science* in 1896 under the heading ‘Housing the Insane’:

‘the supplement of the 50th report of the Commissioners in lunacy contains the plans for six new asylums providing accommodation for nearly five thousand five hundred insane persons by the London County Council at Bexley Heath, for 2,000 in Lancashire for 2,000 (chronic) at Winwick, Stafford for 600, at Chedderton, West Sussex for 600 near Chichester and Middlesborough for 250.’ The Report goes on:

‘The multiplication of asylums is so rapid, their cost so great, and their import so threatening that the question suggests itself, is there no other way?’ (*JMS* 1897 **43** 112-113)

Apparently not. The multiplication continued - if anything, it increased. The most grandiose was that at the Hendon Estate, Epsom, Surrey. It covered a square mile and was designed to house 10,000 inmates – the world’s largest cluster of mental hospitals – comprising Horton (1901), Manor (1902), St Ebba’s (1904), Long Grove (1907) and West Park (1924), the last being delayed because of the onset of World War I.

The newly built asylums were travesties of the dream hospitals the reformers had planned. They were huge in size, accommodating 2,000 or more persons: they were uncomfortable, draughty and even more importantly, they were therapeutically stagnant. Any treatment plan was impossible because of the ill assortment of the admissions over which the medical staff, inadequate in number, had no control vis-à-vis diagnosis, age, sex or intellectual level. All were ‘certified’: current legislation was such that voluntary admission was not an option. Even so, the legal validity of some of the certificates was dubious to say the least. Of course, amongst the hotchpotch of social misfits there was a core of genuine cases and amongst these there were some who would fail to respond to any treatment.

One doctor employed in one of the new asylums, who preferred to remain anonymous, described the situation bitterly thus:

‘They are houses for the detention of the insane, but one really cannot call them for the treatment of mental diseases’. (*Lancet*, 1905, 189-190)

In equally damning mood, Dr T E K Stansfield, Medical Superintendent of the London County Council Bexley Heath Asylum, wrote in his report for the year, 1904;

‘the hopeless character as to the impossibility of recovery of the bulk of the admissions during the year is clearly demonstrated’. (*Lancet*, 1905, 112)

Yet again, Dr E.S. Toogood, Medical Superintendent of the Lewisham Infirmary, wrote;

‘for many years past the London County asylums have been quite full and it is rare to obtain a vacancy until the lapse of a fortnight and often a month after application.’ (*Lancet*, 1902, 403)

Despite the huge numbers of admissions, the acutely mentally ill often could not secure a place, resulting in chaos in workhouses, which was commented upon critically:

‘It is an abuse of the powers under Section 24 of the Lunacy Act, 1891, that lunatics of the class described should be detained in a workhouse.’ (*Lancet*, 1904, 3-4)

One particularly tragic outcome of the unstoppable overcrowding occurred at Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum, a ‘gigantic’ hospital for pauper lunatics in New Southgate, North London. In the morning of 27 January 1903 a fire suddenly broke out in temporary wooden buildings housing wards occupied by 330 patients. The fire quickly engulfed the buildings, and despite the heroic efforts of the staff and the fire-fighters who clambered over the high neighbours walls to attempt to help, 52 persons perished, creating the worst fire in the history of asylums in the UK before or since. The Home Secretary and the Lunacy Commissioner were involved in an enquiry into the fire as the result of which the design of new asylums was altered and a ban was made of the use of wood in their structures. (*Times*, 28 January 1903).

## One Hundred Years Ago 2

### The Reception of European Thought

In the period with which we are concerned, Emil Kraepelin (1886-1926) and Baron Rickard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) were *primi inter pares*. The latter's *Textbook of Insanity* translated into English in 1905 was reviewed in glowing terms in the *British Medical Journal*:

‘that more modern writers, particularly Kraepelin and his school, are opening-up fresh views and bringing about alternatives in the classification of mental diseases, but Krafft-Ebing's work is still and is probably to be, one of the standard clinical expositions of the facts of morbid psychology.’ (BMJ July 15 1905 p?)

At the end of the nineteenth century, awareness of the new thinking of Sigmund Freud and his followers began to creep into the *Journal of Mental Science*, largely through the writing of Havelock Ellis. In German journals the very early writings of Freud, prior to about 1906, were either ignored or dealt with contemptuously. In England, and in English-speaking countries, his writings were approached in puzzled but friendly and respectful terms.

Dr Havelock Ellis was one of the early psychiatrists to accept some of the concepts which Freud put forward, particularly some of his views of the sexual aetiology of neuroses: his own great seven volume work *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* emerged from 1896. That Ellis had not entirely accepted Freud's dicta became evident when he firmly declined to join a branch of the International Association of Psychoanalysis with Ernest Jones as President and M. D. Eder as secretary and nine other members. Nevertheless, Ellis' admiration for, and interest in Freud's work was unflagging, and editors of learned journals turned to him to review Freud's works. In his JMS review of *Fragment of the History of a Case of Hysteria* (1905) Ellis describes Freud's *Studies of Hysteria* as ‘epoch-making’. He noted that Freud had now abandoned the

use of hypnosis (and therefore Charcot's practice) and attached still more importance than before to what he called, 'symbolic manifestations of the psychic conditions'. Whilst himself finding the material 'highly fascinating and profitable' Ellis admitted that 'there are other readers for whom it will seem unsatisfactory, trivial and unwholesome'. (*JMS* 1907 53 830-832)

Ellis' review of Freud's possibly most important book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (2nd edition, 1907) fills an entire page of the *Journal of Mental Science* (*JMS*, 1906 62 406-407):

'there can be no doubt about the truth of the general principle on which Freud lays stress, that even the most trifling actions have a meaning and are not without cause...But in many cases, and especially when no independent evidence is available, doubt is inevitable, because other explanations suggest themselves.'

To those doubters Ellis has this reply: 'Such criticism, however, by no means destroys the interest and value of Freud's work, which cannot fail to be attractive to those whose business is to search beneath the surface of human speech and human conduct for underlying causes'.

## **A Hundred Years Ago 3**

### **In the United States**

The early history of American psychiatry is essentially the history of English psychiatry told with an American accent. For instance, the Association of Medical Officers for the Insane was founded in England in 1841, whereas the American analogue, The Association of the Medical Superintendent of American Institutions, was founded 3 years later in 1844 which continues today as the American Psychiatric Association.

There were differences in emphasis, of course, but the rise and fall of the asylum systems in the two countries ran roughly parallel courses except, perhaps, that the 'gigantic asylums' in the States were really 'gigantic'. Sadly, however, the same bitter arguments broke out when the fashion of closing and destroying the asylums was promulgated. In America, two learned psychiatrists, both presidents of the American Association at different times opined in one that: 'such institutions are bankrupted beyond remedy' whereas the other said 'our chronically ill are trans-institutionalised to our city streets.' The parallel between what has happened in our two countries is painfully obvious and needs no further discussion.

However, to discuss the progress in academic training and research, America leaves us standing. From the early 20th century in the USA scientific medicine has made grand steps forward thanks to vast sums of money having been made available by benefactors as Andrew Carnegie and John D Rockefeller, the latter under the skilful guidance of the medical brothers Abraham and Simon Flexner. An excellent example is the now famous Rockefeller Institute established in New York in 1901. Comparable research centres began to flourish in the rich American universities in particular Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Chicago. The twin benefits of mega money and mega talent together was such that these centres soon challenged the primary of the German/Austrian centres for research.

Nor was psychiatry forgotten in this American academic and research bonanza. In 1902 the Pathological Institute of the New York State Hospitals for the Insane was founded. Original research in the various associated sciences was to be carried out as well as provision of special instructions to physicians on the staff actually treating the insane as well as those just entering the specialty. Professors in psychiatry and a range of allied subjects were appointed as instructors.

Sadly, and shamefacedly, the UK lagged behind in psychiatric research that was being actively carried out in the USA and excellent centres in Europe. The analogue, the Maudsley Hospital in London, conceived of and funded by Henry Maudsley in 1907, had to wait for 1922 before it was up and running.

### **And So Farewell**

Those who might have my last paper may remember the unremittingly gloomy picture I painted of the state of psychiatry in the UK during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. Then, I had the temerity to borrow the evocative word ‘badland’ from the late-lamented Roy Porter as an apt description. Sadly, there is very little that I have found subsequently to lighten the gloom.

And it is in the mood of gloom that I pen this valedictory note, as I can no longer, at 93 years old, visit the libraries of the BMA and, indeed, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and without libraries I cannot research my excerpts for my ‘Hundred Years Ago’. Nonetheless...

Declaration of interest: None

Henry R. Rollin MD, FRCP, FRCPsych, Consultant Psychiatrist Emeritus, Horton Hospital, Epsom Surrey. 101 College Road, Epsom, Surrey KT17 4HY