

## Online archive 10

### Conolly Norman (1852–1908)

*Dr Conolly Norman was the best known psychiatrist in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century. He was very active in the Association and was instrumental in introducing the first woman doctor into it. He was President in 1894. This online archive is an obituary from 100 years ago which helps to show the different ways obituaries are written at different times.*

‘Conolly Norman is dead; and henceforward, to those who knew and loved him, the world is no longer the same. It is hard to realise that that burly form, that strong, kind, humorous face will no more be seen at our meetings. The staunch friend, the wise counsellor, the delightful companion, the witty talker, the upright, just, sympathetic, capable man, is torn from amongst us, and the wound will remain fresh and raw until we also are called to join the great majority. To those who knew him best, his loss cuts one of the ties to life, and renders the prospect of their own departure less formidable.

Conolly Norman was born in 1852, of a north of Ireland family, and spent practically the whole of his professional life in the psychiatric specialty. After serving a few years as assistant medical officer in England, he returned to Ireland, and at a very early age his great ability secured recognition in the appointment of Medical Superintendent of the Monaghan Asylum. From hence, after a few years, he was transferred to Castlebar, whence, after six years’ service, he was appointed to the premier position in lunacy in Ireland, the command of the Richmond Asylum in Dublin. He found the asylum sunk in almost mediaeval inefficiency, and engaged at once in a campaign against dirt, restraint, overcrowding, bad food, inefficient attendance, and all the deficiencies of the old *régime*; and in a comparatively short time he raised the institution to the very first rank, not in Ireland merely, but in the world. A few years after he had assumed control of the asylum, and while still actively engaged in innumerable reforms, he found himself confronted with a very serious outbreak of a disease then almost unknown, and at all times most difficult to recognise – beri-beri. His anxieties were redoubled by the insufficient accommodation at his disposal, by the obstruction to his efforts opposed by superior authority, and by persistent attempts to cast upon him responsibility for the origin, spread, and persistence of the disease. It was at this time that these accumulated anxieties, added to the burden of over-work, and possibly to some infection with the disease itself, culminated in his first serious breakdown in health, and a weakness of the heart from which he never recovered, and which has now brought him to the grave. Under the advice of Sir Douglas Powell he went to San Remo, and for several weeks his condition showed no improvement. In the meantime, however, a friend had been working on his behalf, and a complete statement of the whole of his struggle, authenticated by official documents, was published week by week with inexorable persistence, in the columns of *Truth*. Attention being thus called to the matter, questions were asked in Parliament; official investigation was made. A great meeting was held in Dublin, at which the Lord Lieutenant explicitly laid the blame for whatever *lâches* had been committed, not upon Dr Conolly Norman, but upon the very persons who had been endeavouring to fix upon him the responsibility. It was upon receipt of a telegram at San Remo, apprising him of the appearance of the first article in *Truth*, that Norman began to

improve, and ultimately, though his heart never regained its normal strength, yet he was able to work strenuously for many years.

Dr Norman had always been a very active member of this Association; for many years he was Irish Secretary, and in 1894 he was elected President. It was he who first initiated the practice of extending the Annual Meeting over more than one day, and the meeting at Dublin over which he presided, and which lasted the best part of a week, was in some respects the most memorable the Association has ever experienced. The members from England and Scotland, as well as several distinguished Continental alienists, then discovered for the first time the full meaning and extent of Irish hospitality.

Every day of the meeting they were entertained both at lunch and dinner, every day there was a garden party in the afternoon, and a reception, a *conversazione*, or a dance in the evening, and on some of the days they were even invited out to breakfast. The effect of these hospitalities was apparent at the service at St. Patrick's Cathedral, which formed a ceremonious and appropriate conclusion to the meeting. The long succession of busy days and short nights; the result of almost continuous conviviality; the atmosphere of the crowded cathedral on a hot June day; the lulling effect of the music as "through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault the pealing anthem swelled the note of praise," combined to produce a somnolence so overpowering, that not only was the sermon preached to deaf ears, but several members of the Association, headed by the President, were seen to be fast asleep as they stood during the anthem. It was rumoured afterwards that the Precentor, observing the state of affairs, had at first chosen for the anthem "He maketh peace," but at the last moment substituted for it "Sleepers wake!" Among other things for which the Dublin meeting is memorable, is that it was the last meeting of the Association attended by Dr Hack Tuke, who, in spite of failing health and increasing feebleness, insisted on attending every function. He was one of the large house-party entertained by Dr and Mrs. Norman on the occasion, every one of whom carried away a life-long memory of the unbounded hospitality, the goodness of heart, the consideration, kindness, and untiring attention of their host and hostess.

Dr Conolly Norman was happy in being a man of many interests and many activities. A good linguist he was fond of foreign travel, and eagerly welcomed at the meetings of learned bodies abroad. At the recent Congress at Amsterdam he was elected to the chair of one of the sections. He was a man of extensive reading, with a wide acquaintance with out-of-the-way literature. It was difficult to find any literary subject on which he could not converse with first-hand knowledge. He had a fine taste in art, and thought a good book should have a worthy binding. He was a competent archæologist, and had a good knowledge of architecture and of music.

It was in his own branch of his own profession that he shone. Not all the demands upon his energy, that were made by the administration of a great institution, could prevent him from contributing to that realm of observation that he thought least cultivated and most deserving of cultivation in our specialty – the realm of clinical observation. His contributions to this branch of science are well known to our readers, but in addition to these he wrote numerous reviews, which, whether signed or unsigned, were always recognisable by their keen insight, their racy style, and the humour and wit that illuminated them. But it was as a letter writer that he was most delightful. He cultivated the fine, but well-nigh lost, art of what our grandfathers called "epistolary correspondence," and the writer of this memoir has a heap of his letters, the product of

many years of familiar intercourse, all dashed off at high pressure, in the intervals of important business, and all exhibiting such real literary merit as well as human interest, that they are the subject of frequent reference and frequent re-perusal. In his very last letter, dated but a few weeks ago, he asks, *à propos* of the arrogant attitude of a person then attracting attention, “What has God Almighty done that he should be taken under the patronage of -----?”

For Conolly Norman has unfolded that portal everlasting that gapes for us all. When we in our turn pass through it, may we leave behind us such a record as he has left of duty manfully done; of a clean, pure, upright life; of fights in which he never hit below the belt, or showed or left a trace of ill-feeling; of services rendered without solicitation and without reward; of affection inspired in high and low, in near and far; of the highest standard of honour adhered to without deviation; of a life which reaped its fit reward in “honour, love, obedience, troops of friends.” He who can leave behind him such a record, such an example, has not lived in vain.’

### Reference

Conolly Norman. Obituary (1908) *Journal of Mental Science*, **54**, 387–388.