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Robert Gardiner Hill (1811–1878)

In the first half of the nineteenth century there was a movement to try to treat the mentally ill humanely. This was furthered at the Retreat, York. It was known as the ‘non-restraint approach’ and considerably promoted. Robert Gardiner Hill was probably the first to run a public asylum (Lincoln) without the use of mechanical restraint. He was less well known than John Conolly, but between 1835 and 1840 he was medical superintendent of what was then the Lincoln Lunatic Asylum where he proposed and practised the mode of treating insanity without any mechanical restraints.

Robert Gardiner Hill was born in Louth in 1811 and was educated at Guy’s and St. Thomas’ Hospitals. He entered the medical profession in 1834. In 1835 he was appointed Medical Superintendent of the Lincoln Lunatic Hospital, and held this office for five years. His ‘non-restraint’ method, which was, as it said in his obituary ‘a procedure fraught with momentous results to the insane’, led to John Conolly’s adoption of the doctrine or ‘principle’ of non-restraint and to the widespread practice of this principle in England. Those who did not go the whole length of Hill and Conolly denied that restraint had been grossly abused before their time and that the insane and asylums suffered much in consequence. His obituary said: ‘The name of Gardiner Hill is not one that will soon die.’ It was in 1836 that he first advocated the entire disuse of restraint. His best known work was entitled *A Concise History of the Entire Abolition of Mechanical Restraint in the Treatment of the Insane*. His later life was a happy and successful one as the proprietor and physician to the private asylum where he died.

References

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