

Online archive 8

Sir James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938) (the Wakefield Triangle)

James Crichton-Browne in his ten years as director of the West Riding Lunatic Asylum at Wakefield initiated a scientific approach to the brain and its diseases and later gave it a voice by co-founding Brain, the first journal of what would now be called the neurosciences.

Sir James Crichton-Browne was the first of a succession of talented administrators cum research workers, mainly concerned with brain pathology and histology, who collectively advanced British psychiatry during the second half of the 19th century. He had founded and edited the *West Riding Medical Reports*, six volumes of which he published between 1871 and 1876, and which were more prestigious than the *Journal of Mental Science*, the official journal of the Medico-Psychological Association.

His crowning achievement was to decriminalise the reputation surrounding asylums by opening up its abundant clinical and laboratory facilities. He instigated regular medical *conversazioni* at the asylum, all of them well attended, and addressed by leading contemporary neurologists and alienists alike. Another innovation was to invite senior medical students from Leeds Medical School for demonstrations and tutorials which, more often than not, he conducted himself. Due to his energy and foresight, the centre of gravity of British psychiatry during his time shifted from London to Yorkshire, with emphasis on the triad of Leeds, Wakefield and York.

James Browne was born at Edinburgh and was given his second name Crichton to mark the munificence of his godmother, Mrs Elizabeth Crichton. She had visited James's father (W.A.F. Browne) at the asylum, where he had published *What Asylums Were*,

Are, and Ought to Be in 1838, and in 1839 gave £100 000 to found a new (Crichton Royal) Institution. Crichton-Browne read medicine at Edinburgh where Thomas Laycock (1812–1876) was the professor of medicine. He qualified in 1861, and after brief stints in English provincial asylums was made medical director of the West Riding Lunatic Asylum at Wakefield in Yorkshire in 1866, aged 25. During his decade there he converted it from an old style asylum to a reasonably staffed hospital, with more medical, nursing and lay personnel, all financed by local government. He attracted local medical support, including his former Edinburgh near contemporary Clifford Allbutt, physician at the newish Leeds medical school. He enforced necropsies as a routine, and started a laboratory for anatomy, neuropathology and histology (by Herbert Major and W. Bevan Lewis), and for animal experimentation by his juniors and visitors, such as David Ferrier from King's College, London. The original 1815 structure was enlarged, and the drains were improved after lethal in-house epidemics.

Crichton-Browne copied his father's 'moral' treatment at the Crichton Royal – that is, no restraints, but diversional and occupational therapy with sedation as necessary, and trials of just about all potentially neuroactive medicaments and physical agents of that time, by himself, and by his juniors and visiting doctors, often after self-medication. He insisted on proper records, and started annual open days and *conversazioni* for the local quality, with distinguished visiting speakers. In 1871 he began publishing the annual *Medical Reports*: the six volumes (1871–1876) each had 10–15 monographs by some 40 authors, most from the asylum. He wrote prefaces, the first being a refutation of the gibe that most asylums were scientifically sterile. He had an article by himself in each volume. For example, the remote effects from brain softening, sclerosis and cysts,

as seen in his 1500 necropsies at the asylum and a large neuropathological study of *General paralysis* with colour diagrams of the mainly frontal siting of the chronic inflammatory lesions of neurosyphilis, a major cause of asylum admissions at that time. His shorter articles were on the use of amyl nitrite in the treatment of status epilepticus, and on the features and causes of ‘acute dementia’, (confusional states). He was one of the first to use clinical photography – borrowed, and acknowledged, by his father’s friend Charles Darwin in his illustrations for *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* in 1872 – ‘I can hardly overestimate the value of his [JCB’s] assistance.

Earlier British asylum reports had confined themselves to asylum statistics, and perhaps psychiatric topics by the superintendent, but most of the contents of his *Reports* were by a new branch of neuroscientists, his juniors and friends, some from afar. The most famous was J. Hughlings Jackson who had papers in the third and in all the later volumes of the *Reports*. Another major contributor (who had also been influenced by Laycock) was David Ferrier from King’s College, London, where he was professor of forensic medicine. He came to experiment in the asylum laboratory at Wakefield. In ‘Experimental researches in cerebral physiology and pathology’ he stated: ‘I have to thank Dr Crichton-Browne for kindly placing at my disposal the resources of the Pathological Laboratory of the West Riding Asylum with a liberal supply of pigeons, fowl, guinea-pigs, rabbits, cats and dogs for my research’. His papers ranged out into a wide discussion of brain physiology and the relevance of Hughlings Jackson’s clinical views. Two other contributors achieved wider renown. Clifford Allbutt (1836–1925) wrote on the ophthalmoscopy he had done at the hospital, and, more diffidently, on his electrical treatment of about 20 asylum patients with a constant current from fifteen cell

batteries, applied to the head or neck for 10–15 seconds. Sir Clifford ended as regius professor at Cambridge, and is remembered for his thermometry. Neuropathology was treated in five papers by Herbert C. Major, who followed Crichton-Browne as the asylum director, and in one by W. Bevan-Lewis, also a later director.

All six volumes contain optimistic but unconvincing papers on treatment trials by juniors, on madness, depression, organic brain disease and epilepsy with drugs (some parenterally) and agents then known to have some effect on the nervous system – alcohol, morphine, cannabis, hyoscine, ergot, conia, nicotine, chloral, ether, nitrous oxide, and electricity, all recorded as inspired by Crichton Browne. The *West Riding Lunatic Asylum Reports* ceased in 1876 when Crichton Browne left Wakefield to become Lord Chancellor’s Visitor in Lunacy, but this allowed him to co-found and co-edit *Brain* in 1878 with J.C. Bucknill, D. Ferrier and J. Hughlings Jackson. *Brain* was the world’s first neuroscientific journal, and became probably the most influential. Similar (non-psychiatric) journals followed in German (1879) and French (1880). One suspects that Crichton-Browne was possibly more active than the other three; Bucknill was entirely an alienist in his practice and writings, and had been the founder-editor of the *Journal of Mental Science* in 1853. Hughlings Jackson was the most inspirational of the four but rather chaotic. Ferrier was deeply involved in experimental and clinical neurology and teaching. Crichton-Browne’s visitorship might have allowed more time to edit; his three or so journeys a week to inspect Chancery lunatics throughout England and Wales left time to do much else. *Brain* was similar to the *West Riding Lunatic Asylum Reports* in its range of contents, but more international, with, for instance, a paper by Sigmund Freud on neurohistological staining. Unlike Ferrier and Jackson,

Bucknill and Crichton-Browne contributed almost no articles to *Brain*. The four handed over the tenth volume of *Brain* in 1889 to the new London Neurological Society as its organ, under the editorship of A. de Wetteville, who remained in post until 1900. Crichton-Browne continued as the peripatetic Visitor in Lunacy till he was 82 in 1922.

References

- Ashworth, A.L. (1977) *Stanley Royd Hospital, Wakefield – 150 years, a History*. Berrico,
- Beveridge, A.W. & Renvoize, E.B. (1988) Electricity, a history of its use in the treatment of mental illness in Britain during the second half of the 19th century. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **153**, 157–162.
- Crichton-Browne, J., (ed.) (1871–1876) *West Riding Lunatic Asylum Reports* (6 vols). Churchill.
- Dictionary of National Biography, **8**, 172–173.
- Jellinek, E.H. (2005) Sir James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938). *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*.
- Neve, M. & Turner, T. (1995) What the doctor thought and did: Sir James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938). *Medical History*, **39**, 399–432.
- Shaw-Bolton J. (1928) The evolution of a mental hospital in Wakefield 1818–1928. *Journal of Mental Science*, **74**, 587–633.