

Online archive 9

Thomas Smith Clouston (1840–1915)

Thomas Smith Clouston was one of the most eminent Scottish psychiatrists of the late nineteenth century. In online archives 20 and 22 I have relied heavily on the work of Dr Allan Beveridge to give two accounts of him. Online archive 20 gives patients' accounts of the Morningside Asylum of which Clouston was physician superintendent. These were taken from letters which the hospital authorities considered should not be sent (they were kept in the patients' case notes).

T.S. Clouston, who was to become the doyen of British alienists of his time, was born at Orkney, in 1840. He was educated locally at first and then at Aberdeen's West End Academy. On leaving school, he entered the University of Edinburgh and qualified in 1860, graduating MD with a gold medal for his thesis on the nervous system of the lobster in the following year. Clouston studied under Laycock, the professor of medicine who also lectured on medical psychology and his later writings show the strong influence of Laycock's theories of the mind.

After graduation, he worked for three years as an assistant physician under Skae at the Royal Edinburgh Asylum, where one of his colleagues was David Yellowlees. At the early age of 23, he was appointed physician superintendent of the Cumberland and Westmorland Asylum at Carlisle, where he stayed for 10 years, developing his administrative talents and publishing a number of clinical observations. After Skae's death, Clouston took up the post of physician superintendent at the Edinburgh Royal Asylum, Morningside, aged 33 and in 1879 became the first official lecturer on mental diseases at the University of Edinburgh, holding this post until his retirement in 1908. He was a meticulous, disciplined doctor and under his leadership, the Royal Edinburgh Asylum thrived. Clouston ensured that his junior doctors took detailed case histories and gave strict instructions as to case-note recording. He initiated the building of Craig House

to cater for the upper classes. At work, Clouston could be seen attired in frock coat and striped trousers, carrying a silk hat, as he made his ward rounds.

Clouston, who was a clear and lucid teacher, an original thinker, a masterful clinician, an excellent administrator, and a prolific writer, was to have a major influence on many psychiatrists who later achieved professional distinction in their own right. He became editor of the *Journal of Mental Science* and his *Clinical Lectures on Mental Diseases* went through six editions between 1883 and 1904. These lectures reflected Clouston's somaticist views on the nature of mental illness and theories of treatment.

Clouston was also a great populariser, seeking to reduce the stigma of mental illness and to educate the public with such books as *The Hygiene of Mind* (1906) and *Unsoundness of Mind* (1911), in which he advocated self-discipline and moderation to avert mental disintegration. Clouston methodically kept newspaper cuttings of references to asylum care, and it is obvious that he was very sensitive to the public perception of psychiatry. His annual asylum reports were regularly reviewed in the press, and Clouston sought to make the accounts both readable and instructive. He was also interested in the moral and social issues of the day, taking a prominent part in the establishment of a council of public morals in Scotland, and an interest in the questions of eugenics, marriage, education, and alcoholism. He received many honours during his lifetime, becoming president of the Medico-Psychological Association in 1888, being given the freedom of the Royal Burgh of Kirkwall in Orkney in 1908, and receiving a knighthood in 1911. He died in 1915, leaving a widow, two sons (one of whom was a humorous writer) and one daughter.

We can gain some impression of Clouston from the comments of his colleagues:

‘Clouston was a fluent and forcible speaker, often the more forcible the less sure he was of his own view, but he could always differ pleasantly and without shadow of offence. He did not suffer fools gladly.’ (Yellowlees, 1915)

‘No man ever lectured in a more forceful and interesting way and threw himself more zealously into this work.’ (Robertson, 1915)

‘Full to overflowing of facts and experience, hard perhaps to persuade, but convinced, he was ready to accept the new position. A ready writer, his tendency was perhaps to too frequent appeals to the public, but he was so fully persuaded that he had a very important message to deliver that he was bound to write.’ (Savage, 1915)

‘He found his life’s work in combating an attitude of pessimism and agnosticism towards mental diseases which was too all prevalent, even among a large section of alienists. His method of warfare was the ‘gospel of work’ indefatigably pursued in the clinical study of his patients.’ (Macpherson, 1915)

‘The thing that struck one most was his enormous capacity for work.’ (Newington, 1915)

‘In private life his intimate friends were not numerous, but those admitted to his friendship generally continued in it. There was that aloofness of disposition often characteristic of greater minds which repelled mere acquaintances rather than attracted them within the sphere of intimate friendship.’ (*Journal of Mental Science*, 1915).

A view of Clouston which differed from those of his colleagues is given in the accounts of him to be found in the letters of some of his patients which have been studiously reviewed by Dr Allan Beveridge.

References

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