

## Online archive 1

### William Tuke (1732–1822)

*William Tuke, a Quaker, was the founder of a private mental hospital (the Retreat at York) which played a leading role in the first half of the nineteenth century. The development of moral treatment, a 'non-restraint' policy in public asylums, partly stems from his example. This affected the activities of such psychiatrists as Robert Gardiner Hill (online archive 2) and John Conolly (online archive 3) as well as Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury (online archive 5). This online archive consists largely of extracts from an account written in 1885 by Daniel Hack Tuke, William's great-grandson and himself a distinguished psychiatrist.*

William Tuke was an early proponent of a more humane treatment of the insane than was common in the eighteenth century. The Retreat, which he founded, acted as an example for a generation of medical superintendents of public asylums in the first half of the nineteenth century. Tuke came from a line of non-conformists (his great grandfather was an early supporter of The Society of Friends (Quakers) who had suffered imprisonment and loss of his property because of his religious opinions). Tuke, a Quaker, was born in 1732 and educated first at a day school in York, later a boarding school and finally under the tutorship of a clergyman. His great-grandson (Daniel Hack Tuke) gave an account of his life in a paper in 1856, from which I quote.

'He married at the age of twenty, and had by his first wife five children, the eldest of whom, Henry, co-operated with him in his exertions relative to the Retreat. In 1765, he took a second wife, by whom he had three children. For the last twenty-eight years of his life he was a widower. During the greater part of his life, William Tuke was engaged in mercantile pursuits, but was able to devote a large share of his time to objects of a public and philanthropic character and in any useful or benevolent undertaking, within the proper scope of his exertions, which did not partake of his support, not merely in a pecuniary way, if that were needed, but (which is more important) in personal attention. But while the objects of William Tuke's benevolent exertions were thus various, the subject which undoubtedly most occupied his time and attention, and for which his name will be chiefly remembered, was the establishment of the Retreat at York.

In the year 1791, a lady, a member of the Society of Friends, was placed in the old York Asylum. Her friends, who resided at a distance, requested some of their acquaintance living in the city to pay her a visit. They accordingly went to the Asylum for this purpose, but their request was refused. Very shortly after, the patient died, a circumstance which, in

connexion with the conduct of the asylum authorities altogether, excited considerable suspicion, and led William Tuke to feel very strongly the want of an institution for the insane, in the management of which secrecy should be wholly done away with, and which the friends of the patients might therefore regard with confidence. It appeared to him that this want might be supplied, and his idea carried out into practice, by a Society which had already exerted itself on behalf of other suffering and neglected classes of the human race.

In the spring of the year 1792, William Tuke made the memorable proposition to a meeting of the Society of Friends held in York, that it should have an institution under its own control, for the care and proper treatment of those who '*laboured under that most afflictive dispensation – the loss of reason*'. But the proposition was far from meeting, in the first instance, with a cordial response. Some of the speakers denied the want of any such institution; others maintained that it was entirely out of the province of such an assembly to enter into a consideration of the subject; and the greater part manifested (what might naturally have been expected) little acquaintance either with the extent to which insanity existed, or with the actual condition of the insane. A small number, however, including his eldest son, and the well-known grammarian, Lindley Murray, warmly seconded the proposal. At the subsequent conferences on the subject much fresh evidence, which had been collected, was earnestly put forward, and at length the non-contents were satisfied, and allowed the following resolution to be carried: '*That in case proper encouragement be given, ground be purchased, and a building be erected sufficient to accommodate thirty patients, in an airy situation, and at as short a distance from York as may be, so as to have the privilege of retirement; and that there be a few acres for keeping cows, and for garden ground for the family, which will afford scope for the patients to take exercise when that may be prudent and suitable*' – a resolution which indicates, very clearly, the enlightened benevolence of its authors. This was also evinced by the name proposed for the establishment – "The Retreat" – by which it was "intended to convey the idea of what such an institution should be, namely a place in which the unhappy might obtain a refuge; a quiet haven in which the shattered bark might find the means of reparation, or of safety.' A circumstance may here be related which is of interest, inasmuch as it materially strengthened William Tuke's endeavours to ameliorate the condition of the insane. When turning his attention to the subject, he visited St. Luke's Hospital, in the hope of obtaining information, but was afresh impressed with the necessity of some such institution as the Retreat, by what he witnessed there. He saw the patients miserably coerced, not from intentional cruelty, but from a conviction of the superiority of such a course of treatment over any other. Among them was a young woman, whose condition especially arrested his attention, and excited his compassion. She was without clothing, and lay in some loose, dirty straw, chained to the wall. The form of this unhappy patient haunted him afterwards, and redoubled his exertions, until his plans were carried into practical effect.

The success of the best plans depends, however, upon the execution. He had hoped to have found among his numerous friends some one (we may say like himself) devoted to the good of man, and who having leisure for such an engagement would have taken upon him the voluntary and gratuitous superintendence of the establishment. Such a superintendent, he thought he had found in a brother-in-law, who had just retired from medical practice, and who entered into the project with much interest. He consented to take the office, at least temporarily, and was in the institution at its opening; but in about two months he was removed by death. The founder looked around among his friends for a suitable successor, but not finding one ready for the engagement he agreed to undertake the office himself till a substitute should be found, and for nearly twelve months he had the immediate management of the young establishment upon him. This opportunity for close

observation, confirmed his estimate of the new Institution, and enlarged his hopes of what might be done in the improvement of the management of the insane. He only wanted efficient resident agents. Ultimately, the right man was found in the person of George Jepson. It was, indeed, a rare concurrence of circumstances which brought together two minds, one so capable to design wisely and largely, and the other so admirably fitted to carry such designs into execution. The two men, though exceedingly different, were one in disinterestedness and decision of character; and, therefore, in a steady, conscientious perseverance, which worked onward wherever truth and duty led. Both of them had a strong faith in the dictates of an enlightened conscience, and in the perfect wisdom and love which direct every law of human duty. He was initiated into the duties of his office by William Tuke, who long continued his parental care of the institution, and may be said for a considerable time to have been virtually manager-in-chief. When the new superintendent had fully obtained his esteem and confidence, he still continued his vigilant oversight, and, as treasurer, regularly conducted the financial and some other parts of the correspondence of the institution, till the decay of his sight obliged him, in his eighty-eighth year, to close his long and gratuitous services.

He had the satisfaction of witnessing the success of the experiment, not only in regard to its direct and primary object, but also indirectly by its influence upon other asylums for the insane. In regard to the views entertained by William Tuke and his fellow-labourers respecting the use of personal restraint, it may be well to state, that while they from the first eschewed the use of chains, hobbles, and other harsh instruments of coercion, and in so doing evinced indubitable boldness and humanity, departing as they did from the treatment advocated and pursued by the highest authorities, they never theorized upon or systematized the subject. They in both cases arrived at the same result, namely, the superiority of kindness and judicious treatment over chains and stripes; but in neither instance was the modern doctrine of non-restraint, as set forth by its supporters, asserted; at the same time no one can doubt that then there commenced, in that marked amelioration of the condition of the insane, the real application of those humane principles of treatment. Restraint was not altogether abolished by the early managers of the Retreat, but they undoubtedly began the new system of treatment in this country, and the restraints they did continue to resort to were of the mildest kind.'

The philosophy of the Retreat, which continues as a mental hospital today, played a large part in the move towards more humane care in the first half of the nineteenth century and in the ideas of Robert Gardner Hill, John Conolly and their followers who worked in public asylums. His actions also influenced Anthony Ashley Cooper (Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury).

#### **References**

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Dictionary of National Biography, **55**, 535–536.