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978-1-108-06249-7 - A Memoir of John Conolly: Comprising a Sketch of the Treatment of the Insane in Europe and America

James Clark

Excerpt

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MEMOIR
OF
JOHN CONOLLY, M.D., D.C.L.

I.

DR. JOHN CONOLLY, the subject of the following memoir, was an eminent and accomplished physician, distinguished more especially in that branch of the profession with which his name is so intimately associated.

Even before his residence at the University, he had evinced a strong predilection for the study of psychology, and he chose *Insanity* as the subject of his inaugural thesis.¹ After practising for nine years as a general physician, Dr. Conolly directed his whole attention to mental diseases, actuated in a great measure by an ardent desire to ameliorate the condition and improve the treatment of the insane, and more especially of the inmates of our pauper asylums. The success which attended his earnest and persevering efforts in this direction forms the most interesting portion of the following memoir.

¹ *Dissertatio Inauguralis de statu mentis in Insania et Melancholia.*

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Dr. Conolly was born at Market Rasen, Lincolnshire, in 1794. His father, a younger son of a good Irish family, died early in life. His mother, who was left a widow with a young family, belonged to a respectable county family of the name of Tennyson, and seems to have been a lady of good sense and cultivated mind. Dr. Conolly often spoke of her, and always with great affection and respect. In a letter to a friend he writes, "I cannot now—even now when my own years are declining—reflect on my mother's care when I was young, her patience, her forbearance, and her self-sacrifices, without emotion. I think of her every day of my life, and feel more and more how much of whatever little good has ever been in me was owing to her."

Dr. Conolly was sent at an early age to be educated at the Grammar School of Hedon, of which the vicar of the parish was master. During the seven years which he passed at this school, he learned almost nothing. In some notes on his parentage and education found among his papers, he gives the following account of his early education:—

"For seven years of school life at Hedon, my daily life, except in holidays of three weeks at Midsummer and Christmas, was unvaried. Before nine in the morning I repaired to the school-house. At nine the schoolmaster's awful figure appeared round the corner near the church, and on his entrance I exhibited Latin exercises, written the evening before, and repeated a page or more of the Eton grammar, and construed a portion of whatever Latin author I was advanced to, or

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EARLY LIFE.

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of the Greek testament. Between eleven and twelve I construed a second lesson. At noon there were two hours unemployed, except by a frugal dinner and more abundant play. In the afternoon more construing lessons, or, once in the week, a writing copy and some arithmetic. In all these years my schoolmaster, the vicar, never, that I remember, gave me any assistance, except by blows on the head. I read in the usual order, ‘Cornelius Nepos,’ a book or two of ‘Cæsar’s Commentaries,’ and was then promoted into poetical reading, and at the returning holidays was enabled to inform my few inquiring friends that I was in Ovid and Virgil, and latterly in Horace. Of the absurdity of such reading nothing need be said. I read with difficulty and understood nothing. I was not allowed to read an English lesson. Of the Latin authors I remained profoundly ignorant, never, I believe, except on two occasions, having even a glimmering of their meaning; one being when rather interested with the structure of a bridge over the Rhine, and another when rather excited by the catastrophe of Phaeton, on which latter occasion the exuberance of my feelings was promptly rebuked.”¹

On quitting school he went to reside at Hull with his mother, who had married a second time, her husband being a French gentleman, a political émigré. He went to school at Hull, and was also taught French by his stepfather, who is said to have been very fond of

¹ In after life Dr. Conolly became a good classical scholar, and wrote Latin with some elegance.

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young Conolly, and not only taught him the language thoroughly, but made him familiar with some of the best French authors. This seems to have given Conolly that taste for French literature which he retained through life. In a letter to his friend M. Battel, he says, "My thoughts revert more and more to my earlier days and to my education in your language, to which I am largely indebted." In another letter he writes:—"When I am ill and tranquil, I have a singular pleasure in reading French. The language is associated in my mind with the early days of my life and my earliest studies. Condillac's *Essai 'Sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines'* is now on my table,—the very volume put into my hands forty years ago, and of which I seem to remember every word: perhaps to it I owe the direction of my mental life."

Dr. Conolly entered life at the age of eighteen as an officer in a militia regiment, in which he served for several years. He married, while still very young, the daughter of Sir John Collins, and went to reside in France, on the banks of the Loire. A year afterwards he decided on entering the medical profession, and in 1817 began the study of medicine in the University of Edinburgh, and at the termination of the *curriculum* received the degree of Doctor of Medicine. He was much esteemed by his fellow-students at the University, and was an active member and one of the presidents of the Royal Medical Society. It was in the discussions of this Society, and in the essays he wrote for it, that Dr. Conolly first showed his powers of public speaking

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and writing; gifts which he possessed in no ordinary degree, and which proved so valuable to him in promoting the humane and philanthropic objects in which he was engaged through the principal part of his life; and more especially did they aid him in his labours in the cause of the lunatic and the imbecile.

Soon after leaving Edinburgh, Dr. Conolly settled in practice as a physician in Chichester, about the same time with the late Sir John Forbes. Drawn together by congenial tastes and pursuits, these two young physicians formed a warm and life-long friendship, to which they owed much of their mutual happiness, being often engaged in similar literary pursuits, or in the interchange of friendly support, when it was the object of either to promote some public scheme of usefulness or philanthropy. It was soon found, however, that even the cathedral town of Chichester did not afford a sufficient field for the practice of two active physicians, and Dr. Conolly removed to Stratford-on-Avon, where he remained till 1827, when he was appointed Professor of the Practice of Medicine in University College, London.

His residence at Stratford seems to have been one of the happiest periods of Dr. Conolly's checkered life. Much of his time was pleasantly occupied in literary work, and he had a large and agreeable correspondence with men of science and literature, arising in a great degree from his connection with the *Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, the meetings of which he generally attended, and to which he contributed various

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publications. He was also much engaged in literary works with his friend Sir John Forbes, chiefly in preparing the *Cyclopædia of Practical Medicine*, a large and important work, and in editing the *British and Foreign Medical Review*.

Dr. Conolly took a warm interest in everything that related to the social condition and sanitary improvements of the borough. He was for several years one of the aldermen, and served once as mayor. By his own exertions chiefly, he established a public dispensary, which proved a great benefit to the poor of Stratford and the vicinity. And as long as he remained at Stratford he performed gratuitously the duties of physician, visiting the sick poor at their own homes when they were unable to come to the dispensary; and he continued to take a warm interest in the prosperity of the institution long after leaving the place. One source of his attachment to Stratford was its being the birthplace of Shakspeare, of whose works he was an ardent student. In his walks about Stratford, a friend writes me, he invariably carried a volume of Shakspeare's plays or sonnets in his pocket, to read in some sequestered spot, which he imagined Shakspeare himself might have frequented. Writing to his friend Mr. Hunt, in 1861, he says:—"It is now just thirty-eight years since I settled at Stratford—often afterwards to be unsettled, until I found my proper place as friend and guide to the *crazy*—and I remember everybody and every circumstance as if it were but yesterday."

He was very popular and much esteemed at Strat-

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STRATFORD-ON-AVON.

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ford; and, on his appointment to a professorship in the London University, carried with him the grateful remembrance and good wishes of the inhabitants of the town and neighbourhood. Dr. Conolly's professional income at Stratford is said not to have exceeded 400*l.* a year, but my informant added that had he remained he would soon have obtained a large professional income.

In 1835, when residing in Warwick, after he had resigned his professorship in University College, he still interested himself in Stratford, and exerted himself successfully to secure the preservation of Shakspeare's tomb, and the restoration of the chancel of the church. He drew up an appeal to the public for funds, and acted as chairman of the committee formed for this object.

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II.

DR. CONOLLY'S appointment as Professor of the Practice of Medicine, the principal medical chair in the College, was a remarkable distinction, as he was at that time only *thirty-three* years of age. He held the professorship for nearly four years; but finding that the life of a London physician was not in accordance with his feelings, he resigned the chair and returned to the country, taking up his residence at Warwick, being appointed at the same time Visiting Physician of the Lunatic Asylums in that county, an appointment which he had held when he resided at Stratford.

While professor in University College, Dr. Conolly's thoughts seemed to have been much occupied with the treatment of the insane, and the necessity of insanity forming an essential part of the education of every medical man. With this view he proposed to the Council of the College to give his pupils clinical instruction on insanity, in one of the lunatic asylums in London. His offer was declined, and thus clinical instruction in mental diseases was thrown back for thirty years in this country. About this time he published his work on the *Indications of Insanity*.

He continued to practise at Warwick, with the ex-

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ception of one year at Birmingham, till 1839, when he was appointed Resident Physician to the Middlesex County Asylum at Hanwell, then the largest in England. Dr. Conolly now felt himself in the position which he had long desired. An ample field was opened to him to put into practice his enlightened and benevolent views on the treatment of the insane, a subject on which he had long meditated; and it may be truly said that after entering on his duty, he did not lose a single day in commencing his mild and humane treatment, so promptly did he make the *total abolition of all mechanical restraint* in Hanwell Asylum a practical fact; thus establishing in that large asylum the most important change ever introduced in the treatment of the insane.

Before entering on Dr. Conolly's system of treatment, it may be interesting to take a brief survey of the origin and progress of the remarkable and beneficial change effected in the treatment of the insane since the conclusion of the last century.

The benevolent and courageous French physician, *Pinel*, was the first to attempt the restoration of the insane to a position among human beings. The scene of his exertions, which formed the first great step towards the non-restraint system, was the *Bicêtre* hospital in Paris for male lunatics. In this frightful hospital, or rather prison, the universal practice was to load patients with heavy chains, often only removed at death, and to immure them in dark, unwarmed, and unventilated cells. Pinel, after full con-

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sideration, determined at once to release a large number of patients. The following account of the experiment is extracted from the 'British and Foreign Medical Review':—

“Towards the end of 1792, Pinel, after having many times urged the Government to allow him to unchain the maniacs of the Bicêtre, but in vain, went himself to the authorities, and with much earnestness and warmth advocated the removal of this monstrous abuse. Couthon, a member of the commune, gave way to M. Pinel's arguments and agreed to meet him at the Bicêtre. Couthon then interrogated those who were chained, but the abuse he received, and the confused sounds, cries, vociferations, and clanking of chains in the filthy and damp cells, made him recoil from Pinel's proposition. 'You may do what you please with them,' said he; 'but I fear you will become their victim.' Pinel instantly commenced his undertaking. There were about fifty lunatics whom he considered might without danger to the others be unchained, and he began by releasing twelve, with the sole precaution of having previously prepared the same number of strong waistcoats with long sleeves, which could be tied behind the back, if necessary. The first man on whom the experiment was to be tried was an English captain, whose history no one knew, as he had been in chains forty years. He was thought to be one of the most furious among them; his keepers approached him with caution, as he had in a fit of fury killed one of them on the spot with a blow from his manacles.