

Conference briefing

Spring Quarterly Meeting, Galway, 11–12 April 1990

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“Only two things are too serious to be jested upon – potatoes and matrimony” *Irish aphorism*

Galway's Eyre Square, overlooked by the Great Southern Hotel which was built for the Midland Great Western Railway Company in 1845, is about the size of Belgrave Square and has grass of Irish green traversed by paths. Opposite the hotel is a metal sculpture of a sailing craft with a fountain at the base and around the square are shops, restaurants, financial houses, dwelling places and the Browne Doorway, carved in stone. The Brownes were one of the tribes of Galway arriving in 1200. The buildings around the Square vary in shape, size and colour but blend most pleasantly. Not far away is the mediaeval Church of St Nicholas, over which one can with a lump in the throat at last see the sun beginning to go down over Galway Bay. The Square was originally a fair green and now on Sundays it reverberates joyfully to the sound of people at their recreation.

About a mile from here, across the river Corrib and beyond the Cathedral, the College held its Spring Meeting in the very pleasant University. An attendance of over 500 beat all records for Quarterly Meetings. Many Irish colleagues may have taken this opportunity to attend a College meeting without having to bear the cost of travel to the mainland, the employing authorities of Irish psychiatrists, particularly those in the Republic, being chary of funding them to come to College meetings.

Among the main organisers and leading lights on the Irish side were Professor Tom Fahy of Galway University and Dr Charles Smith, Chairman of the Irish Division and Medical Director of the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum, Dublin, the equivalent of Broadmoor. Dr Smith in a paper on 'What is Life' dispelled thoughts that he might discourse on the philosophy and biology of life by telling us that for patients in his hospital the length of stay was decreasing while for prisoners serving life sentences it was increasing; and he reminded us that all the people in Eire, particularly young men, who were the main players in the game of crime, were 'sinners'. At the conference dinner he proposed a toast to the guests

and alluded to the cunning whereby the daily registration fee was only £10. Among the guests was a lady who was quick to correct her being addressed as the Lady Mayoress instead of the Mayor of Galway. She said the City had gained its charter 506 years ago, Christopher Columbus prayed in it, it had many links with the Continent and enjoyed "non-stop festivals". Mr Noel Treacy from the Ministry of Health of Eire said that a detailed review in 1945 had led to community care, sectorisation and a reduction since 1983 of 4,000 in the mental hospital population. There were, he said, rehabilitation of the long-term mentally ill, reorganisation of services for child and adolescent psychiatry, expansion of posts in psychiatry and an expenditure on health as a whole of 21.7% of the budget. His Ministry welcomed dialogue for an "indirectly directly" approach. A few minutes later the President extolled the contribution of the Irish, especially their psychiatrists, to art, scholarship and high spirits, the Irish being often serious but never solemn. He wondered whether we should one day have an Irish woman as President and, speaking for the College, did not recognise any borders anywhere.

We heard too that mental health legislation in Eire dated from 1843 and 1948 and was under review. The health services in Eire are organised into six Boards, each of which has hospitals and community care areas. Medical Officers of Health are the Directors of Community Care in these areas, of which the Dublin Board has nine and the other Boards three to five. There are psychiatric beds not only in psychiatric hospitals but also in dual purpose hospitals, such as psychiatric and geriatric, and general hospitals. No purely psychiatric hospital has more than 700 beds. Many hospitals accept paying patients. Cork, as well as Galway and Dublin, have universities, and there are powerful indications that there will soon be a College meeting in Cork. We may feel confident for the future of psychiatry in Eire because the Galway medical students told me that they like this specialty



Dr Jim Birley

as having fewer items than other specialties in its diagnostic categories and so giving them better chances of being right!

Three simultaneous short paper sessions competed with the first of two sessions on Anxiety but, having new advantages in being held in the morning and as far as possible theme-orientated, they attracted big audiences, up to 60 "sinners". To the benefit of all concerned, short papers and posters are increasing in value and volume as media at College meetings for communication of research. At the College's previous meeting in Eire, in the spring of 1978, fascinating talks ascribed all or nearly all Irish psychiatric morbidity to the potato famine but this time the papers covered such a vast range that no one topic dominated, although current interests such as serotonin, tardive dyskinesia and post-traumatic stress disorder were well represented.

In keeping with the musical and choral merry-making talents of the Irish, a very melodious group of three, a doctor, an architect and a musician, enter-

tained us at both the dinner and a delectable sea food supper after a lavish reception given by the Irish division in the magnificent Aula Maxima of University College.

Among organised trips to the surrounding countryside was a sumptuous medieval dinner, at which 'Jim was King', in a 15th century fortress in County Clare. One could drive south to an area of the undulating and terraced bare limestone extending over a hundred square miles called the Burren and seeming to be just like the moon. In and around it are dolmens, strange ancient buildings with militaristic or religious auras, 'disappearing', that is, seasonal lakes and very long and curious caves. A man discovered the largest of them when rescuing his dog, who had chased a rabbit into it. To the north of Connemara are glorious mountains, loughs, and seascapes in every shade of green, grey, brown, blue and yellow. Here is Kylemore Abbey, which is not at all like an abbey in the predissolution sense but a graceful and imposing lakeside mansion built for a surgeon in the mid-19th century. It became an abbey when Irish nuns, having fled in World War One from an abbey in Ypres, settled in it. It is now occupied by them and schoolgirls who board there, so that it should be called a convent or school or convent school – but it is Irish.

By a similar wonderful illogicality the road signs in the country really do point in the wrong directions. The College would applaud the Garda's right to request a breath test from any driver but there are not many Gardas to be seen. Petrol is expensive but consumption is kept down by a maximum speed limit of 55 mph. Otherwise driving, except on a few modern highways and in Galway is, partly because Eire has the lowest population density in Europe, much as it was in England in the 1930s. The buildings of the Galway airport, consisting of two small wooden huts, add to the atmosphere of old worldliness.

Apart from 'No extradition' painted on some country walls we saw no signs of political unrest and indeed everybody was friendly to a degree. When my wife and I were heistating beside a road crossing a young man stopped his car and said, "You can cross now – the lights are green". We never discovered whether the lights were green in his favour or ours. Equally crazy was the taxi driver who said of a visiting circus that he was going to start "just a rumour" that lions and tigers had escaped.

Warmest thanks and congratulations are the well merited desserts of the Irish and London members of the College staff for arranging such a marvellous and memorable meeting.