

## PSYCHIATRY IN THE 1870s: KILVERT'S MAD FOLK

The Reverend Francis Kilvert, whose famous Diary is currently being featured on television, died a hundred years ago, in September 1879. The Diary contains a number of entries relating to mental disorder, occurring for the most part among his parishioners at Clyro in Powis and Bredwardine in Herefordshire, on the Welsh borders, and at Langley Burrell in Wiltshire, but in one or two instances within his own family.\*

### A self description of a depressive illness. (E.H)

This extract is dated 'duly Morrow 1874', when the diarist was curate to his father at Langley Burrell. John Couzens was one of the staff at the rectory.

'As John Couzens was clipping the turf edges of the lawn and beds he told me how for months while he was at work in this place for us, some years ago now, the Devil had tempted him to destroy himself. It came on first quite suddenly in Parson's Ground by the side of the old lane while he was cutting some flower sticks with a bill hook. He threw himself down on the ground in his misery, got away from his bill hook and at last dozed off. His sleep and appetite went from him, and he had no heart nor comfort in his work. He dared not be alone nor within reach of a knife for fear he should cut his throat. He often brought Alice his wife down to be with him while he was at his work and could only rest quiet at night as long as he had his arm around her, for he feared the Devil would come and carry him away. He was utterly miserable and one day he went down on his hands and knees behind the great Portugal laurel bush on the lawn by the copper beech (it is cut down since) and cried and prayed terribly and as if his heart would break. This trouble and temptation lasted some months. He did not know what made it come on suddenly then, for he was in good health and spirits. He believed God sent it. For he began to feel how wicked he had been, cursing and swearing and drinking as a young man. The Devil tempted him to destroy himself because he was so wicked. Once when he went up into the loft to throw down some straw he was tempted to make an end of himself by throwing himself down.

"Master told me not to do anything that he didn't tell me, and not to do anything to myself, but what good were it to tell me that? Mr Headley came here one day and he said to me 'Shake it off, John. Shake it off', but what good were that? That

were easier said than done. "Twere easy to say it". Gradually the trouble and temptation passed away. "I'm another man now," he said, "I've been a different man ever since. But," he said earnestly, striking his hand upon the shears. "I wouldn't have any poor creature go through what I went through then, and I wouldn't go through a week of it again for all Squire Ashe's fortune".'

It is unlikely that Kilvert had any knowledge of contemporary psychiatric ideas and still less likely that John Couzens did. So we may accept this account as altogether unsophisticated. Its close resemblance to a textbook description of an endogenous depressive illness is therefore of some interest. We see here the causeless onset, the suicidal ideas, the insomnia, anorexia and loss of appetite, and the duration of several months with slow spontaneous recovery. More clearly than in a textbook, we see also the sufferer's irritation with attempts at comfort and 'reassurance' by well-meaning friends and his later sense of pride in the severity of the sufferings he endured. We might also see here the sufferer's 'rationalization' of his depression in terms of past wickednesses; alternatively, the description lends support to the suggestion\* that a primary feature of endogenous depression is the intrusion into consciousness of items from the memory bank where unpleasant memories are stored.

There are many more entries concerning John Couzens, the last being in March 1878—up to that time there had been no recurrence.

### Some Parishioners and Villagers (A.W.)

Descriptions of mental disorders among the villagers of Kilvert's parishes are all incomplete—the cases are not followed through. As the published three volumes of the Diary contain only extracts, and the original manuscripts have been lost or destroyed, we cannot tell whether more would be found in the omitted entries.

First, a case whose diagnosis (if any) can be left to the reader:

9 February 1870. 'Went down to John Watkins to give him some good advice, but could not talk to him much as the houseful of people was just sitting down to tea'.

19 February 1870. 'John Watkins standing in the middle of his cottage hat and stick in hand and shaking like the very palsy or ague.'

\* Extracts from the Diary are reproduced here by permission of the publishers, Messrs Jonathan Cape.

\* LISHMAN W. A. (1974). The speed of recall of pleasant and unpleasant experiences. *Psychological Medicine*, 4, 212-218.

*10 March 1870.* 'John Watkins in the Cwm no better, staggering round and round his house whirling his head round about like a mad man on a Polar bear, unable to sit down, he says, so kneeling on the floor sometimes to rest himself. He gets no rest in bed or at night, dreads the coming on of darkness and is haunted by evil thoughts and dreams. He seems to be suffering from despondency and remorse, and is plainly in a most miserable pitiable state of mind and body. Gwenny Williams shakes her head at his condition.'

*22 March 1870.* 'Called at John Watkins. He was just in the same abject, wretched, pitiable state, shaking from head to foot fancying himself unable to sit down or keep still. Remorse gnawing at his mind. Neighbours say he is 'roguish' and shams, probably it is the cunning of insanity!'

*April Eve 1870.* 'Coming through Hay [-on-Wye] I met Phillips [a local farmer]. I asked him what he thought of John Watkins. He said he thought he was a rogue and wicked and shammed a good deal of his illness?'

*14 April 1870.* 'Met Powell the relieving officer in Castle St and talked to him and Mr Trumper about John Watkins of the Cwm and the desirability of removing him to Abergavenny Asylum as he seems to have been a good deal more crazed lately wandering about the country and scarcely master of himself. Dr Clouston saw him this morning and thought him a case for the Asylum from the wildness of his talk. But when Mr Trumper as a magistrate went up with the relieving officer to see Watkins before giving the order for his removal, the cunning fellow probably saw what they were after and talked so sensibly and answered all questions so reasonably that the order could not be given. Powell came in when they returned passing through the village and told me all about it.'\*\*

Another Watkins family, not related to the first, had an afflicted member:

*4 July 1871.* 'Old John Lloyd came into John Williams's while I was there and he told me his sister Mrs Watkins had gone mad and was living

\*\*Dr Charles Stewart Clouston was the local GP and MO to Hay Union. He had qualified at Edinburgh only two years previously, in 1868. He died in 1883, aged 36. I have so far not been able to ascertain whether he was related to his more famous namesake, Thomas, who qualified, also from Edinburgh, in 1860. Abergavenny (Pen-y-Val) was then the nearest asylum, as that at Talgarth (Mid-Wales) had not yet been built. Dr Clouston was a local practitioner, apparently not related to his famous contemporary namesake.

with them at Cwmgwanon, and they did not know what to do with her. Hannah Jones had told me about the madwoman of Cwmgwanon. They keep her locked up in a bedroom alone, for she will come down amongst them stark naked. She has broken the window and all the crockery in the room, amuses herself by dancing naked round the room and threatens to wring her daughter-in-law's neck. Then she will set to and roar till they can hear her down the dingle at John Williams's house, nearly half a mile.'

*September Eve 1871.* 'I went up to lower Cwmgwanon to see the old madwoman Mrs Watkins. Her son was out in the harvest field carrying oats, and I had to wait till he came in to go upstairs with me. While I waited in the kitchen the low deep voice upstairs began calling, 'Murder! John Lloyd! John Lloyd! Murder!' They sent up into the oatfield for her son, but I had waited nearly an hour before the oatladen waggon came into the rickyard. The madwoman's son, a burly tall good-humoured man with a pleasant face, came to the garden gate and thought I could not do any good by seeing his mother. So I went away. But when I had got half way down the meadow Cwmside on my way to the Burnt House he shouted to me to come back and asked me to go up and see her. He led the way up the broad oak staircase into a fetid room darkened. The window was blocked up with stools and chairs to prevent the poor mad creature from throwing herself out. She had broken all the window glass and all the crockery. There was nothing in the room but her bed and chair. She lay with the blanket over her head. When her son turned the blanket down I was almost frightened. It was a mad skeleton with such a wild scared animal's face as I never saw before. Her dark hair was tossed weird and unkempt, and she stared at me like a wild beast. But she began directly to talk rationally though her mind wandered at moments. I tried to bring some serious thoughts back to her mind. 'Whom do you pray to when you say your prayers?' 'Mr Venables.' It was the dim lingering idea of someone in authority. I repeated the Lord's Prayer and the old familiar words seemed to come back to her by degrees till she could say it alone. When I went away she besought me earnestly to come again. 'You'll promise to come again now. You'll promise,' she said eagerly.'\*

\*This is the case featured in the TV episode entitled "The Madwoman", where, however, passages from the other Diary entries have been made use of.

But unfortunately there is no further mention of this poor lady, who must have 'gone mad' long before her brother reported to John Williams. Once again we are reminded that asylums were needed to rescue sufferers from the kind of 'community neglect' described here, not in order to 'banish them from society'.

The prevalent notion of the lunatic as 'raving' or 'roaring' is supported in this case, as it is in another that Kilvert came across while staying at a hotel in Worcester before attending the funeral of his eccentric cousin, to be mentioned below.

*3 December 1870.* 'At 1.30 this morning I was awakened by a horrible screaming in the Star. The whole hotel was in an uproar, people running about up and downstairs, crying, talking, whispering, trampling, shouting, and one voice yelling high above all, a woman's voice. The shrieks were like those of a dying person in agony. 'Oh Jesu, Oh Jesu', the voice seemed to be yelling. Overhead someone was striding to and fro across the room like a wild beast or like someone in great agony of mind or body. In the morning we heard the cause of the disturbance in the night. A gentleman's maid-servant, an old and faithful domestic, had gone mad and he was taking her to the Worcester County Asylum. For some reason he could not take her on there that night so he brought her to the Star. She had a keeper. Her arms and legs were tied and then it took six men to get her upstairs. She was raving mad.'

And an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy is in this fragment recorded by Kilvert while on a visit to Salisbury:

*26 August 1875.* 'A good-natured woman came out to ask if I had lost my way and we fell into talk. She had just been obliged to send one of her daughters to the Fisherton Asylum [now the Old Manor Hospital]. She had been driven mad by a wicked gypsy woman who professed to tell her fortune and informed her that she would either marry a young man who would desert her or else she would go mad, and this preyed on her mind.'

The mentally handicapped also receive mention in the Diary. Kilvert's sympathy for the parents finds expression in a somewhat negative form in the following case. But he is able to appreciate the child's qualities, even though he cannot admire or idealize her as he is so often prone to do with children.

*10 January 1872* 'As I came down the village I hunted up Mrs Willis the old cook at Langley Rectory. She has been sorely tried by having three dumb

children more or less idiots, one happily died and another happily likely to die.

The eldest child, a noble stout girl of ten, dumb and silly, sat by the fire laughing strangely and making idle noises. She began to play with me. Her mother said the child was very fond of music and caught up tunes with an exceedingly quick ear.'

Mary Price of Bredwardine, an epileptic imbecile, is the subject of numerous entries describing her with amused friendliness:

*5 January 1878.* 'I found Priscilla Price and the idiot woman, her step-daughter, sitting at their tea by the fire. Prissy is 77 and the idiot 55. 'Ar Tader, Ar Tader!' cried the idiot. 'She means 'Our Father,' explained her step-mother. 'She has been wanting to see the clergyman, the gentleman that says 'Our Father'. Prissy detailed to me the story of an illness she had suffered, illustrated by a dramatic performance by the idiot as a running accompaniment. Occasionally in addition to the acting of the details of the illness, the idiot roared out an affirmative or negative according to the requirements of the tale. 'The blood spouted up,' said Prissy. 'Yes!' thundered the idiot. 'She had to run out into the deep snow,' said the step-mother. The idiot measured the depth of the snow upon her thigh.'

*June day 1878.* 'Mary made signs that she was very ill and going to die. She pressed her hand on her side and said, "Puff, puff." Priscilla interpreted for her. "That means 'die'," she said. "Bom, bom," said the idiot. "That means the great bell will toll for her," said Priscilla.'

*6 August 1878.* 'The idiot had ordered her coffin and paid a halfpenny for it. The carpenter kept the halfpenny 3 months and then returned it without the coffin. The idiot was angry and gave the order to someone else.'

*10 August 1878.* 'Mary had fallen in a fit with her head under the grate a day or two ago, but was not burnt or hurt. Priscilla pulled her out.'

#### Kilvert's Own Family (A.W.)

Maria Kilvert, whose funeral in Worcester Cathedral the diarist attended in 1870, was a first cousin of his father. She was an eccentric recluse. 'She shut herself up almost entirely' for 15 years before her death. Her house in the Cathedral close 'looked like a house of the dead, no movement, the blinds never drawn up', etc. Occasionally she would 'come rapidly into the Cathedral' wearing a 'respirator' [a device of gauze and wire worn over the nose and mouth to keep out

the dust]. At her death she not only almost disinherited her family, but left £600 to Lord Lyttelton, the Lord Lieutenant of Worcestershire, with whom 'She had not the slightest acquaintance'.

A more confirmed sufferer from mental disorder was the diarist's father's sister, Aunt Emma.

*5 October 1871.* 'My father had been to Dr. Fox's [at Brislington House, Bristol] to see Aunt Emma. She did not use quite so many oaths and curses as usual. Dr Charles Fox sat by all the time, and she did not scruple to say in his presence that his house was a hell upon earth'.

*22 December 1873.* 'My father went to Brislington to see Aunt Emma. He brought back a very good account of her. She was quiet and natural and talked much of my acquaintance, the Rev Rowland Williams, about whom she said she had written to me but the letter had of course been stopped.'

Lastly we have Kilvert's own visit to his aunt—one of the great set pieces of the Diary:

*2 November 1874.* 'Brislington Asylum is a fine palatial-looking building very beautifully situated on the high ground between Keynsham and Bristol, and the grounds are large and well kept. I was glad to see and renew my acquaintance with Mrs Hopton, the matron, who was once house-keeper at Sydney College. She told us that it was a bad day with Aunt Emma who was in unusually good health, therefore more violent and excitable than usual. She asked us to go out into the garden to see her where she was sitting quietly, rather than bring her into the house where she might make a great noise. Mrs Hopton accompanied us out to a nice large lawn, in which stood a magnificent weeping willow. There was a high ivied wall running round three sides of this lawn and the house bounded it on the fourth.

Aunt Emma was sitting on a low seat in a sunny corner doing some work with a cat or two cats on her lap. She appeared to me dingily dressed in black and she wore a hideous brown straw mushroom hat. She started up full of her grievances at once but stopping to say to me, 'There is a great friend of yours here. Mrs Hopton has quite lost her heart to you,' while poor Mrs Hopton turned round and round and did not know which way to look. Aunt Emma said she had been placed and

was kept at Brislington by a conspiracy and by the Government who must all have their heads cut off. She was in daily danger of her life and was cursed and sworn at for a 'damned bitch'. She had just been hunted out of the house like a wild beast. Mrs Bullock and Mrs Ford were in conspiracy against her life, and Dr Charles Fox's. Dr Charles dared not sleep in his own house for fear of being murdered and he was obliged to sleep in the asylum every night.

As we walked up and down the Lawn, Aunt Emma in the middle holding each of us by the arm, I heard a strange uproar proceeding from the house. It sounded at first like a woman's voice in voluble expostulation and argument, then loud impassioned entreaty rising swiftly into wild passionate despairing cries, which rent the air for some time and then all was still. When we went into Mrs Hopton's room to have a cup of tea Aunt Emma accompanied us to the garden door of the house and knocked loudly and imperiously till a maid servant came. 'I must go back and collect my work,' she said to us. 'I will follow you directly. Let the door remain unlocked for a few minutes,' she said authoritatively to the servant. 'Very well, Miss,' answered the girl. Presently came a knock at the door of Mrs Hopton's room where we were at tea. Mrs Hopton rose and went to the door, then with an astonished look and an angry flush on her face she threw the door wide open and announced Aunt Emma. 'But,' she muttered aside, 'how did you get in? This is against all rule.' She went out to reprove the maid for leaving the door unlocked.

'Did you see another lady in the garden when we went out?' Mrs Hopton asked me. 'No, I saw no one.' 'She saw you and called you by your Christian name, "Frank Kilvert, Frank Kilvert"'. I went to her and got her indoors immediately.' 'But who is it?' 'Well, you must not let it go any further but her name is \_\_\_\_\_.' 'I lifted up my hands in sorrow and amazement. Is it possible? And were hers those piteous passionate despairing cries that I heard? Poor child, poor child. If I had only known. Poor beautiful unfortunate \_\_\_\_\_.'

*29 December 1878.* 'At 1 p.m. to-day poor Aunt Emma died. The poor, exhausted restless brain is at rest now. R.I.P.'

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