

1987 Annual Meeting in Belfast

GEOFFREY WALLIS, Consultant Psychiatrist, Fulford Grange Hospital, Rawdon, Leeds

With a mighty defiant roar four archetypal screws propelled Yorkshire members and soldiers across the Pennines and the Irish Sea. Some of the members were heading for a destination of which there is a saying "The fastest game in the world is passing the parcel in the Europa Hotel" but changing the hotel's name and restricting its entrance and exit to unostentatiously guarded channels, like airlocks, in a wooden box, seems now to deter the bombers.

Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland since 1920, has, perhaps even more than most United Kingdom cities, a run-down and dejected centre. Militaristic barricades add to the woe and one can sense the unemployment in the docks and shipbuilding yards. The suicide rate went down in 1979 but has been rising since 1981 and the incidence of schizophrenia has not greatly altered. These trends suggest that economic depression is as baneful as 'the troubles'; the Mayor, at a civic reception, and Dr M. N. Hayes, Permanent Secretary of Northern Ireland's Department of Health and Social Security, proposing the toast of the College at the Annual Dinner, stressed that life in Northern Ireland was "normal". None of us saw any violence and a special charm, humour and kindness shone from all the Irish whom we met. Nevertheless one young Irish psychiatrist told me that the conflicts had caused the deaths of 10 of his 30 school peers. Most of the city was bedecked with Union Jacks. One of our intrepid members explored sociologically in the Falls, where he noticed sharp distinctions between Protestant and Catholic areas in atmosphere, displays and newspapers.

The attendance was large, convivial and enthusiastic. Dr Thomas Bewley, retiring President, having recalled, in his reply to Dr Hayes' toast, that Jonathan Swift was brought up in Belfast and became a curate there before advancing psychiatry in London and Dublin, described in his Presidential Address, the publication of which I anticipate, the images of psychiatrists as portrayed in literature, drama and humour: there were stereotypes of villains; agents of corrupt social orders; men preoccupied with money and sex; confused thinkers; useless nonentities; skilful, cold scientists; electronic contraptions; magicians; father confessors; and Viennese psychoanalysts, from whom, Dr Bewley thought, came the heaviest cross which psychiatrists had to bear—the couch of Sigmund Freud. Some medical students thought psychiatry was a waste of medical education. Reinforcers for these unflattering opinions were malpractices in Nazi Germany, Russia and Japan; lack of objectivity in claims made by schools of psychotherapy in the United States of America; pretensions of psychiatry beyond its clinical boundaries; and ignorance of the differences between psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and psychologists.

Thereupon Dr Bewley inducted Dr Jim Birley as President and Dr Birley, warmly praising Professor George Brown, who was made an Honorary Fellow, for practising Wilfred Trotter's dictum "There is no stronger antigen than a new idea", punned that he had come into the Presidency on a Wing and a Brown. He observed that during Dr Bewley's tenure of the Presidency the College had faced the inception of the Mental Health Act Commission and the floating of its Draft Code of Practice, had launched the research appeal and had altogether become a smarter College. Later, at a reception given by the Irish Division in a country hotel, Dr Bewley said he hoped that psychiatry could bridge the rift in Ireland and indeed there were several Eire psychiatrists at this meeting.

One of them, Dr Michael Kelleher from Cork, took the meeting's prize for humour, whether intentional and whether Irish or not. As a "non-practising academic" he was perturbed to find that he could not read his memo cards when the lights were dimmed for his slides and then he dropped the cards on the floor. Soon, however, he turned his audience's attention to his slide images, which unlike "practising academics", he showed for long enough to enable viewers to digest them. His topic was suicide and suicidal behaviour in the Irish Republic and he found that, although coroners were inclined to say that a patient had died from lack of air due to a rope tied round the neck rather than suicide, the suicide rate in the Republic had increased fourfold in the previous 15 years.

There was later a note about his paper in *The Times* and, in accordance with the College's new and surely enlightened openness, Dr Michael Pare, Public Education Officer, conducted a press briefing which resulted in wide media coverage of the meeting.

Dr Pare was also elected to the Honorary Fellowship. Dr Bewley, in commending him, reminded us of his pharmacopsychiatric studies, concerning particularly the monamine oxidase inhibitors, and of his having for many years served the College as Treasurer and as Programmes and Meetings Committee's Chairman.

Professor Eugene Paykel, speaking for Professor Erik Stromgren, who came with his wife from Aarhus and achieved an Honorary Fellowship, recalled his enormous contributions to psychiatric genetics, editorship of the *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* and chairmanship of the World Psychiatric Association's section on Nomenclature and Classification.

Magnificent oratory came from Sir Martin Roth in citation for Professor Alfred Meyer, who achieved the same honour. As long ago as 1926 Professor Meyer had studied the effects of carbon monoxide on experimental animals. He

came to England at the same time as Willy Mayer-Gross, Eric Guttman and Erwin Stengel and he and they very greatly influenced British psychiatry. He took the Chair of Neuropathology at the Institute of Psychiatry in 1949 and thereafter concentrated on the neuropathology of leucotomy and, with Sir Desmond Pond and others, of epilepsy. For health reasons he did not come to this meeting but his wife Nina did and she was an astonishingly vivacious dancer at the Irish Division's reception, where dinner with the sun streaming in led on to airs on the Irish harp by Derek Bell and rejuvenating rhythms from 'The Chieftains'.

Aaron Beck was there too. Charming, white-haired, bow-tied and unassuming, he talked of his having practised psychoanalysis until it disenchanted him. He thought cognitive therapy had its roots in the "moral" treatment of the last century and was nurtured by the French in treatment by "persuasion". In the first of two papers which he gave he arranged suicidal patients into ideators, attempters and completers. Ideation varied with depression; depression with hopelessness; and a high score on a hopelessness scale with suicide. Patients with the latter attributes had "massive cognitive distortion" and needed help to deal with their "inside world", whereas the psychiatrist should take a realistic view of many of the attempters as "losers" and help them to adjust to the "outside world". In the other paper he described two outcome studies, both favourable to cognitive therapy, for panic disorders and emphasised the value of reproducing panic in the consulting room, by devices such as spinning, overbreathing and contracting the chest muscles, and then rationalising the catastrophic misinterpretations of the resultant bodily sensations.

Dr Beck's description of attempters and completers tied in nicely with a paper by Dr Stuart Montgomery about patients who had damaged themselves at least thrice but were not significantly depressed and who then "attempted" suicide less often under treatment with low dose depot flupenthixol than with mianserin or placebo.

Dr Beck, like the rest of the audience, was fascinated by Dr Nagy Bishay's novel account of successful cognitive restructuring for 13 morbidly jealous patients whose psychopathology, Dr Bishay found, resulted from experience of unfaithfulness by a significant member, usually a parent, of the opposite sex. Some people at the meeting were inclined to dismiss Dr Beck as a 'healer' but, quite apart

from his quiet and reasoned teaching of cognitive therapy, he has devised rating scales and conducted clinical trials.

Northern Ireland's population is 1,500,000 and each of its six counties has a mental hospital. There are other district general hospitals or similar psychiatric units. The social workers in the psychiatric services are employed by the health authorities but I had the impression from the psychiatrists that their interdisciplinary problems were almost as bad as on the mainland. However, the Northern Irish are doing better, at any rate in my view, with their psychopaths in that last year a Mental Health Order precluded their detention in hospital.

Queen's University, pleasantly placed among predominantly pink stone buildings, was the venue for the meeting. The routine tranquillity of the Annual General Meeting was punctured by the claim of the Biological Psychiatry Group's wish to be a Section but it lost to the Substance Misuse Group. There were two simultaneous sessions for the papers and a poster display, which was perhaps disappointing because many of the posters listed in the programme were absent but for compensation two sessions yielded 23 short papers.

In a special lecture Madame Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, distinguished Parisian psychoanalyst, took us with a richness of biblical and other literary allusions into a fantasy world of what she called "thought disorders", such as the "megalomaniac wish to become God . . ." to return to "the maternal matrix—the smooth interior of the mother's body—the smooth and homogeneous maternal body . . . to return to Paradise". De Sade, she said, believed that one had to destroy to create happiness but she maintained that perversions were attempts to escape from the world as it was and from differences between the sexes.

There were receptions by the Department of Health and Social Security in Stormont and by the City Council in the magnificent City Hall, where the Belfast Youth Orchestra played the assembly into a splendid pink and white Great Hall for the College's annual dinner. Explorers were fascinated in the south by the Mountains of Mourne and in the north by the Giant's Causeway.

Professors Tom Fahy and Robert McClelland and Drs Michael Curran, Alexander Lyons, William McCallum and William Norris and their colleagues deserve many thanks and congratulations for this memorable and happy event.

Books Suitable for a Psychiatric Library

The College library has produced a computerised list of books suitable for a psychiatric library covering the period 1983–1986. Copies are available from the College, price £2.