

SWIFT AND THE DOCTORS

by

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... It would be endless to give ... a catalogue of all Diseases incident to human Bodies; for they could not be fewer than five or six hundred, spread over every Limb, and Joynt; in short every Part, external and intestine, having Diseases appropriated to them. To remedy which, there was a Sort of People bred up amongst us, in the Profession or Pretence of curing the Sick.¹

A genius may be defined as one who, in whatever sphere, opens out new fields of thought or action for his more earthbound fellow-beings. Swift's definition, speaking of authors, is:

One who upon a deserving subject, is able to open new scenes, and discover a vein of true and noble thinking, which never entered into any imagination before; every stroke of whose pen is worth all the paper blotted by hundreds of others in the course of their lives.²

There is no doubt that Swift was a genius by this or any other definition. Addison said he was 'the greatest genius of the nation',³ which in a period of English history which included Newton, John Locke, Wren, Marlborough, Bolingbroke, Pope, Steele and Addison himself was high praise indeed. It is none the less a tribute which cannot be denied.

The Augustan period of English literature of which Swift was the chief ornament coincided with a time of great scientific achievement. Nevertheless the art of medicine was still far from being a science and was indeed only beginning to shed the superstitions of the Dark Ages. The eighteenth century has justifiably been called the golden age of quackery. Charlatans, astrologers and mountebanks abounded, while the more academically trained physicians were apt to be vain periwigged creatures whose ignorance was only equalled by their vanity.

Those who have lived on into the second half of the twentieth century and are sufficiently mature to remember the first half should occasionally think of the pattern of disease which then prevailed. Young people could be and often were carried away by fulminating illness or scarred for life by its results. Pneumonia was a threat to the strongest, women often died in childbirth or during the puerperium, a sore throat in a child might be diphtheria, and a febrile illness might herald the onset of poliomyelitis. Tuberculous meningitis was another menace. Nowadays young people who do not kill themselves through the agency of the internal combustion engine have an excellent chance of living long enough to die of one or other of the degenerative diseases, but fifty years ago many were very conscious that death from acute disease was lurking round the corner.

If this is true of half a century ago, it was a hundred times more so in the eighteenth century. When to the hypersensitivity of genius is added the fact that Swift suffered from a chronic and at times utterly disabling ailment it is not surprising that he was at times almost morbidly preoccupied with health and disease.

Swift's Personal Health

It is, of course, well established that for most of his life Swift suffered from bilateral Ménière's disease. In October 1712 he said that he 'had his giddiness 23 years by fits' but the first attack of which we have a record seems to have affected him on 5 December 1708. The entries in his account book are as follows:

- Decbr. 5. Horrible sick.
- 12. much better. Thank God and M.D.'s prayers.
- 16. bad fitt at Mrs. Barton's.
- 24. better but dread a fitt. Better still to the end.
- Janry 21. an ill fitt but not to excess.
- 29. out of order.
- 31. not well at times.⁴

A later attack appears to have affected his left ear only and took place on his forty-third birthday, 31 October 1710. Writing to Stella he says:

This morning, sitting in my bed, I had a fit of giddiness; the room turned round for about a minute, and then it went off, leaving me sickish, but not very. I saw Dr. Cockburn today, and he promises to send me the pills that did me good last year; and likewise has promised to send me an oil for my *ears*, that he has been making for that ailment for somebody else.⁵

For many years it has been thought that the physicians of Swift's time did not realize that the deafness, nausea and giddiness were part of one syndrome. Wilde certainly thought so a hundred years later, but he was wrong. Since then Swift's letters to his friend Charles Ford have come to light. On 20 November 1733 he wrote:

And although in the London Dispensatory approved by the physicians there are Remedyes named both for Giddiness and deafness, none of them that I can find were prescribed to me. . . . The Doctors here think that both these Aylments in me are united in their Causes. . . .⁶

Swift continued to suffer from Ménière's disease almost to the end of his long life. He tried many and various remedies, some prescribed by the doctors, others by his friends. One treatment was taking spa waters in quantity, which only made him worse, causing his legs to swell and his giddiness to increase⁷. This is not surprising, if our modern views of the causation of the condition are correct. Lady Orkney gave him a preparation of aloes, which he thought helped. 'Tis Hiera picra 2 spoonfull, devilish stuff.'^{* 8}

At the end of March 1711 he had a severe attack of shingles in his shoulder which made him miserable and dispirited. Those who have suffered from shingles will sympathize with him.

I have been in no danger of Life, but miserable Torture [he told Stella]. All these days I have been extremely ill, tho I twice crawled out a week ago: but am now recovering, tho very weak. The violence of my Pain abated the night before last; I will just tell you how I was and then send away this letter wch ought to have gone Saturday last. The Pain encreased with mighty Violence in my left Shouldr and Collar bone & that side my Neck. On Thursday morning appeared great Red Spots in all those Places where my Pain was, & the violence of the Pain was confined to my Neck behind a little on the left side; which was so violent that I [had] not

* 'A purgative electuary made of aloes, saffron, honey and other ingredients' (Williams).

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a minutes ease nor hardly a minutes sleep in 3 days & nights. The Spots white and full of corruption (tho) small, the Red continues too, and most prodigious hott & inflamed. The Disease is the Shingles. . . . I must purge and clystr after this. . . .⁹

In spite of the purging and clystering, application of flannel and rubbing the part with Hungary water* the pains continued, and he was not completely free of symptoms until September. Six weeks after the onset on 10 May he excuses himself for not writing to Stella:

A Journall while I was sick would have been a noble thing made up of Pain; and Physic, & Visits & Messages. The 2 last were nearly as troublesom as the 2 first. One good Circumstance is that I have grown much leaner, I believe I told you, that I have taken in my Breeches 2 inches. . . . In answer to your good opinion of my Disease, the Drs sd they never saw any thing so odd of the Kind; they were not Shingles but Herpes miliaris, and 20 other hard names. I can never be sick like othr People, but always something out of the common way. . . .¹⁰

I think we may deduce from this letter that Swift was beginning to feel better. A little later in the same letter he says 'My left Hand is very weak & Trembles, but my right side has not been toucht.' Sir William Wilde, in *The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life*,¹¹ suggests that this weakness of his left hand was a cerebral symptom and linked with Swift's deafness, nausea and giddiness, but it is obviously an effect of the attack of shingles. Sir William Wilde's work in archaeology and medicine is in all his other publications admirably accurate, but this curiously topsy-turvy book is quite often wrong both in premises and deductions. Much of the confusion about Swift's medical history, including to some extent the continuance of the myth that he was insane, comes from the fact that many lay authors regard it as gospel. In Wilde's favour it must be remembered that Prosper Ménière did not describe the syndrome which bears his name until 1862.

Apart from the repeated attacks of Ménière's disease and trouble with his shins, which he ascribed to injuries sustained from time to time and which seem to have given him repeated trouble over the years, his health appears to have been good until he reached old age. He did, it is true, suffer from 'a cruell Disorder' which he says:

Kept me in Torture for a Week, and confined me 2 more to my Chamber; . . . the Learned call it the Haemorrhoides internae which with the attendance of Strangury, loss of Blood, water-gruel and no sleep require more of the Stoick than I am Master of, to support it.¹²

Swift was never disposed to minimize the severity of his ailments.

Stella died in 1728. Swift was then aged sixty. Soon after this, within a year or so, a subtle deterioration appears in his character as shown in his writing and personal relationships. He seems to have become morose and introspective, and moreover a scatological element appears increasingly in his writings which has been a puzzle to his biographers and an embarrassment to his admirers ever since. 'Swift was a paid Tory hack with a weakness for scatology' says Christopher Booker in the *Sunday Times*.¹³ Robert Louis Stevenson refers to him as 'a kind of human goat, leaping and wagging (his) scut on mountains of offence'.¹⁴ Accusations such as these are of course quite unjustified, but if one

* An infusion of rosemary flowers in rectified spirits of wine named after a Queen of Hungary.

were to consider only the works of his last active decade they would be hard to refute. Productions such as the *Pastoral Dialogue*, the *Legion Club* and *An Examination of Certain Abuses . . . in the City of Dublin* are hard to condone.

This may partly be ascribed to the lack of Stella's steady influence. As Delany said:

His infelicities of temper were remarkably augmented after the death of Mrs. Johnson: whose cordial friendship, sweet temper, and lenient advice, poured balm and healing into his blood: but as soon as he was deprived of that medicine of life, his blood boiled, fretted and fermented beyond all bounds.¹⁵

Some say this was due to the malign influence of Pope. Russell Brain ascribes it to sexual immaturity, presumably a failure of development, and reminds us that jokes about excretion are normal with boys below the age of puberty, after which their place is taken by jokes about sex.¹⁶ This may be so, but it must be remembered that *A Tale of a Tub* contains plenty of sexual humour—too much indeed for some people. But it is gay, if Rabelaisian, and far easier to stomach than the outpourings of his final years. It is perhaps more plausible simply to regard it as an unfortunate result of mental deterioration due to ageing, a view which is confirmed by the inaccuracy of his memory in his later years.

About the year 1741 or 1742, when he was about seventy-five years of age, he began noticeably to lose his memory and to act irrationally. It was obvious to his friends that he was suffering from that saddest of diseases, senile decay, or what Oliver Gogarty used to refer to rather heartlessly as 'delayed burial'. About this time he suffered from a series of boils on the arms and body and he also developed a large and painful swelling of the left eye. Subsequently he had considerable difficulty in expressing himself, and as Lord Brain has pointed out, the utterances which he did achieve were of an emotional nature, which is a characteristic of aphasia. Lord Brain suggests that this may have been due to thrombophlebitis spreading from a small venous sinus in the orbit to the superior petrosal sinus and thence to the cortical veins which drain the lower part of the frontal lobe, including, on the left side, Broca's area.¹⁷

Medical References in Swift's Writings

Being a life-long sufferer from Ménière's syndrome Swift was, understandably, very much a valetudinarian, and delighted in discussing his symptoms with those who, like Sir George Beaumont, shared his symptoms. Equally naturally he had a dread of the acute fulminating diseases and terrifying epidemics of those days. Particularly he feared the plague, which is not surprising when we remember that he was born only two years after the great plague of London. In the *Journal to Stella* he says:

We are terribly afraid of the plague; they say it is at Newcastle. I begged Mr. Harley for the love of God to take some care about it, or we are all ruined. There have been orders for all ships from the Baltick to pass their quarantine before they land; but they neglect it. You remember I have been afraid these two years.¹⁸

This turned out to be a false report, but later he says: 'the physicians here talk very melancholy about a fever epidemic and thought it was a forerunner of

the plague¹⁹ which was in fact raging in Hamburg. However, these fears were fortunately groundless.

Smallpox, however, was a different matter. Many 'persons of quality' as Swift put it, including the French Dauphin and the Earl of Danby, whom he described as 'a very hopeful young man', died of it. Biddy Floyd, one of Swift's many young lady friends, was unfortunate enough to contract the disease. She was so beautiful that according to Swift when she looked out even the frozen Thames began to thaw. In spite of his dread of infection he visited her several times when she was ill and as he said himself he 'had the luck of it', for he never got the disease. He was concerned lest Biddy should lose her beauty, but she seems to have recovered without undue scarring. Miss Ashe, another friend, was not so fortunate; she survived, but the rash was 'very full' and one of her eyes was affected. Reading the *Journal to Stella* one feels that for Swift the loss of their looks was for these girls almost as great a tragedy as death itself. 'One of the Maids of Honr has the small-pox,' he writes, 'but the best is, she can lose no Beauty, & we have one new handsom Md of Honr.'²⁰

Queen Anne herself had had smallpox at the age of twelve. Her medical history is nothing if not comprehensive. She had in all seventeen pregnancies but only one of her children survived more than a few weeks. In consequence she has been said to have suffered from syphilis, congenital and acquired, but the children may in fact have died from rhesus incompatibility. She has been accused of lesbianism and of alcoholism, and whatever the truth of these stories there can be no doubt that she was a massive over-eater. At her coronation, when she was thirty-seven, she had to be carried in some of the processions in a low armchair as she had lost the use of her legs from 'gout and corpulence'. Swift took a great interest in her symptoms. 'The queen is well,' he said in April 1711, 'but I fear will be no long liver; for I am told she has sometimes the gout in her bowels.'²¹ 'I hate the word *bowels*' he adds in parenthesis, with somewhat unusual squeamishness. 'The gout vibrated fearfully through the Queen's frame, flying from her feet to her stomach,' he said later. Finally according to her doctors it 'translated itself upon her brain' with fatal results. 'The gout in the stomach' appears to have been a favourite diagnosis at the time; Swift tells us, 'This morning at five my Lord Jersey died of the gout in the stomach, or apoplexy, or both: he was abroad yesterday and his death was sudden.'²²

In passing we may note that Queen Anne was the last monarch to touch for the King's Evil. She seems to have had more belief in her curative powers than her predecessor King William III, who when touching for the Evil would say 'may God cure you and give you better sense'. Swift may have had more faith in the ceremony, for he asked the Duchess of Ormond to get a lad touched, 'the son of a grocer in Caple Street, one Bell, the ladies have bought sugar and plumbs for him'.²³ Lord Masham's six-month-old son developed a lump in the neck which Swift diagnosed as the King's Evil, but we do not hear that he was 'touched' for it.²⁴

In reading the *Journal to Stella*, the correspondence, and the account-books which Swift kept so carefully over the years, none of which was intended for

public consumption, one is struck by the tender sympathy he felt for his friends when they were ill. This concern contrasts markedly with the venomous attacks he made, publicly if anonymously, on his enemies whether personal or corporate. His grief at the deaths of two of his young favourites, Anne Long and Lady Ashburnham, is unaffected. He had a particular regard for Lady Ashburnham because she was very like Stella in appearance. In the *Journal* we read:

I am just told that poor dear Lady Ashburnham, the Duke of Ormds daughter dyed yesterday at her Country House; the poor creature was with child. She was my greatest Favorite, and I am in excessive Concern for her loss . . . she was naturally very healthy; I am afraid she has been thrown away for want of care . . . I hate life when I think it is exposed to such Accidents, and to see so many thousand wretches burthening the Earth while such as her dye, makes me think God did never intend Life for a Blessing.²⁵

His grief at the death of his protégé, 'poor little Harrison the Queen's Secrty', who died of 'Feavr & inflammation on his Lungs', was very genuine, and incidentally his considerable financial generosity to Harrison, Anne Long and indeed to Stella herself, gives a different picture from the legend of the gloomy, parsimonious and saturnine Dean which has grown up since his day. He even had a good word for the notorious Mrs. Manly who succeeded him as author of the *Examiner* and was the mistress of his printer, John Barber:

Poor Mrs. Manly the author is very ill of a dropsy and sore leg; the printer tells me he is afraid she cannot live long. I am heartily sorry for her; she has very generous principles for one of her sort; and a great deal of good sense and invention: she is about forty, very homely and very fat.²⁶

Swift obviously used the word 'homely' in the sense still given it in America.

Trauma played its part in the eighteenth century. Coaches overturned with monotonous regularity and horsemen constantly fell off their mounts. A fall at Hampton Court was the immediate cause of the death of the ailing and crippled King William III in 1702. These were violent times. As J. H. Plumb says:

there was an edge to life in the eighteenth century which is hard for us to recapture. In every class there is the same taut neurotic quality—the fantastic gambling and drinking, the riots, brutality and violence, and everywhere and always a constant sense of death.²⁷

The consumption of alcohol certainly was impressive. At this time one in eight of the population of London is said to have died of excessive gin-drinking.²⁸ There was ever-present danger from highwaymen on the roads, and from pirates even in the Irish Sea. A gang of hooligans, some said to be of noble birth, roamed the streets of London at night. 'Did I tell you of a race of Rakes calld the Mohacks that play the devil around this Town every Night, slitt peoples noses, & beat them etc., . . . fais they shan't cut mine, I like it better as it is' he added.²⁹ The fact is that Swift was not notable for physical or, in some ways, for moral courage in spite of the vituperative nature of some of his writings.

Duelling was another danger to life. He gives graphic descriptions of two fatal duels, one between Sir Cholmley Dering and Richard Thornhill, and the

other between the Duke of Hamilton and Lord Mohun. His account of the latter is as follows:

This morning at 8, my man brought me word that D. Hamilton had fought with Ld Mohun, & killd him, and was brought home wounded. I immediately sent him to the Dukes house in St James's Square, but the Porter could hardly answer for tears; and a great Rabble was about the House. In short, they fought at 7 this morning the Dog Mohun was killed on the Spot, and wile the Duke was over him Mohun shortening his Sword stabbd him in at the Shoulder to the heart: the Duke was helpt towards the Cakehouse by the Ring in Hide park where they fought, and dyed on the Grass before he could reach the House, & was brought home in his Coach by 8, while the poor Dutchess was asleep. . . . I am infinitely concerned for the poor Duke who was a frank honest good natured man, I loved him very well, & I think he loved me better. He that [*sic*] the greatest mind in the world to have me go with him to France, but durst not tell it me; & those he did sd I could not be spared, wch was true. They have removed the poor Dutchess to a Lodging in the Neighborhood, where I have been with her two hours, and am just come away. I never saw so melancholy a Scene For indeed all Reasons for real grief belong to her, nor is it possible for any one to be a greater loser in all regards. She has moved my very soul. The Lodging was inconvenient, & they would have removed her to anothr; but I would not suffer it; because it had no room backwards; and she must have been tortured with the noise of the Grubstreet Screammers, mention her Husbands murder to her Ears.³⁰

Swift did his best to console the Duchess and next day reported to Stella:

I have been with her 2 hours again; and find her worse. Her violence not so frequent, but her melancholy more formal and settled. She has abundance of witt and Spirit; about 33 years old, handsom, and airy, and seldom spared any body that gave her the least Provocation; by which she had many Envyers and few Friends: Ldy Orkney her Sister in Law is come to Town on this Occasion, and has been to see her; and behaved her self with great humanity; They have been always very ill together; and the poor Dutchess could not have Patience when people told her I went often to Ldy Orkneys.³¹

Duelling was not for Swift although he must at times have been in danger of a challenge in spite of his cloth. He did, however, narrowly miss death or injury through his association with Harley, the central political figure of Queen Anne's reign. This was on the occasion of the Bandbox Plot. Harley, or Lord Oxford as he had recently become, received by post a box inside which as he opened it he caught sight of a pistol. Swift carried the box to a window, and continuing to open it with great care found inside two pistols with 'artificial barrels' of 'two large ink-horns charged with power and ball'. The barrels pointed in opposite directions and the triggers were connected by a thread. Swift opened it without mishap, and commented, 'I wonder how I came to have so much presence of mind, which is usually not my talent'. 'I fairly ventured my life', he said complacently, and he took full credit for preserving Harley from assassination.³²

On a previous occasion Harley had not escaped so lightly. Antoine de Guiscard was a well-born French adventurer who had been driven out of France and had turned traitor to his country. After a picturesque career on the Continent as a soldier of fortune he came to England where he flourished for a time, partly because of his friendship and temperamental affinity with Bolingbroke, then Henry St. John. They quarrelled, it is said over the paternity of the child of a

mistress whom they shared. Nevertheless St. John suggested that de Guiscard should be given a pension of £500 per year for services rendered when commanding a regiment of British refugees.³³ Harley, who disliked him intensely, reduced the figure to £400. In revenge Guiscard determined to betray the British as he had previously betrayed the French. An incriminating correspondence with a Parisian banker fell into Harley's hands, and a warrant, signed amongst others by St. John, was issued for his arrest.

Guiscard was brought before the Lords of Council at St. John's office in the Cockpit at Whitehall for investigation of the charges. At first he tried to bluff the matter out, but he soon showed signs of desperation and rage. Suddenly moving over to Harley he whipped out a pen-knife and drove it into his breast. Harley fell to the ground and a scene of indescribable confusion ensued. Swords were drawn, and chairs and tables were hurled in all directions before Guiscard was finally overpowered, not without being considerably damaged in the process. Harley, the original unflappable, seems to have been the only person to have kept calm in all this turmoil. Still bleeding, he was carried off in a sedan-chair to his house in the Strand, but not before he had sent a message to his sister to continue her dinner engagement without him.

Swift, who was on intimate terms with Harley and meeting him almost daily, was very upset by all this:

'O dear MD, my heart is almost broken' he wrote to Stella and Dingley:

... 'Tis of Mr. Harley's being stabbed this afternoon at three o'clock at a committee of the council. . . . That desperate French villain, Marquis de Guiscard, stabbed Mr. Harley. . . . The poor creature now lies stabbed in his bed by a desperate French popish villain. Good night, and God preserve you both, and pity me; I want it.

Harley was first attended by Paul Bussière; in the circumstances curiously enough for he was also a French refugee, but Radcliffe, who was called in later, insisted on consulting with his own surgeon, Green. Swift did not entirely approve of the change; he says 'we fear by the caprice of Radcliffe who will admit none but his own surgeon, he has not been well lookt after'; and again, 'He has had an ill surgeon, by the caprice of the puppy Dr. Radcliffe, which has kept him back so long.' This in spite of the fact that Radcliffe had prescribed a 'bitter' and 'some herb-snuff' for Swift's giddiness not so long before. Apparently he and Radcliffe had fallen out. If there was an estrangement we do not know what was behind it: perhaps just a clash of temperament between two great men.

Harley's recovery was slow enough, but he recovered after 'an abundance of extravasated blood came out of the wound'. Guiscard died in Newgate, to Swift's disappointment for 'they had found out a [legal] way to hang him.' His body was pickled in a trough and shown to delighted spectators at twopence a time for a fortnight until the Queen came to hear about it and ordered the disgusting exhibition to be stopped.³⁴

The private lives of some of the most important ministers of State of the period was scandalous indeed. Lord Wharton was a profligate and roué, some of whose exploits could not now by any means be retailed in polite society, and

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Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke was his peer in this and every other respect. On 24 August 1711 Swift tells us, 'Lord Radnor and I were walking the Mall this evening; and Mr. Secretary met us and took a turn or two, and then stole away, and we both believed it was to pick up some wench; and tomorrow he will be at the cabinet with the queen: so goes the world.'³⁵ He obviously disapproved of Bolingbroke's dissolute habits but nevertheless they were for him compensated by his brilliance, and they remained lifelong friends.

This was a dissolute as well as a quarrelsome period of history, and venereal disease in all its forms was rife. There are frequent references to its effects and treatment in Swift's publications. In *A voyage to the Houyhnhnms* he says:

. . . prostitute Female *Yahoos* acquired a certain *Malady*, which bred Rottenness in the Bones of those, who fell into their Embraces; . . . this and many other diseases, were propagated from Father to Son, so that great Numbers came into the World with complicated *Maladies* upon them. . . .¹

He does not hesitate to make the most scurrilous attacks upon those who have aroused his ire. In 1705, Lord Cutts, nicknamed the Salamander because of his coolness under fire at the battle of Namur, was sent to Ireland to command the forces and act as Lord Justice. For some unknown reason Swift took exception to the appointment, or possibly to his behaviour while in Dublin. Whatever the cause, Swift published a most vitriolic attack on him:

So have I seen a batter'd beau,
By age and claps grow cold as snow
Whose breath and touch, where'er he came,
Blew out love's torch, or chill'd the flame.
And should some nymph, who ne'er was cruel
Like Carleton cheap, or famed Du-Ruel,
Receive the filth which he ejects,
She soon would find the same effects
Her tainted carcass to pursue
As from the Salamander's spue;
A dismal shedding of her locks,
And, if no leprosy, a pox.
*Then I'll appeal to each bystander
Whether this be'nt a Salamander?*³⁶

There are, however, surprisingly few—if any—references to venereal disease in his private papers. Possibly he did not want to shock his correspondents.

Swift was a man of affairs rather than a mystic, but none the less he was a devout churchman. This is still true even if it appears to be contradicted by the nature of some of his writings; as for example, in *A Tale of a Tub*, the brilliant and humorous *jeu d'esprit* which simultaneously established his literary reputation and ruined his chances of ecclesiastical preferment. In those days religious, or perhaps more properly sectarian, feelings ran high. Swift was a High Anglican who did not care particularly for the Church of Rome but who disliked the nonconformists, Deists and freethinkers with even greater intensity. *A Tale of a Tub* is an allegorical story of three brothers, of whom Peter represents the Church of Rome, Martin the Church of England and Jack the nonconformists.

Swift hits hard at all three but his most scathing sallies are directed against the nonconformists. In particular he loved to poke fun at them for their affected manner of speech, known as canting or snuffling. 'He had a tongue so Musculous and Subtil, that he could twist it up into his Nose, and deliver a strange Kind of Speech from thence'³⁷ he said of Jack. But worse, much worse, was to follow. In the section on *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit* we read:

As yet, *Snuffling* was not; when the following Adventure happened to a *Banbury Saint*. Upon a certain Day, while he was far engaged among the Tabernacles of the *Wicked*, he felt the Outward Man put into odd Commotions, and strangely pricked forward by the Inward: an Effect very usual among the Modern Inspired. For, some think that the *Spirit* is apt to feed on the *Flesh*, like hungry Wines upon raw Beef. Others rather believe, there is a perpetual Game of *Leap-Frog* between both; and, sometimes the *Flesh* is uppermost, and sometimes the *Spirit*; adding, that the former, while it is in the state of a *Rider*, wears huge *Ribbon* Spurs; and, when it comes to the Turn of being *Bearer*, is wonderfully headstrong, and hardmouth'd. However it came about, the *Saint* felt his *Vessel* full *extended* in every part; (a very natural Effect of strong Inspiration;) and the Place and Time falling out so unluckily, that he could not have the convenience of Evacuating upwards, by Repetition, Prayer, or Lecture; he was forced to open an inferior Vent. In short, he wrestled with the *Flesh* so long, that he at length subdued it, coming off with honourable Wounds, all *before*. The Surgeon had now cured the Parts, primarily affected; but the Disease driven from its Post, flew up into his Head; And, as a skilful General, valiantly attacked in his Trenches, and beaten from the Field, by flying marches withdraws to the Capital City, breaking down the Bridges to prevent Pursuit; So the Disease, repell'd from its first Station, fled before the *Rod of Hermes*, to the upper Region, there fortifying it self; but, finding the Foe making attacks at the *Nose*, broke down the *Bridge* and retired to the *Head-quarters*. Now, the Naturalists observe that there is in human Noses an *Idiosyncrasy*, by Virtue of which, the more the Passage is obstructed, the more our Speech delights to go through, as the Music of a Flagelate is made by the *Stops*. By this Method, the Twang of the Nose, becomes perfectly to resemble the *Snuffle* of a Bag-pipe, and is found to be equally attractive of *British* ears; whereof the saint had sudden Experience, by practising his new Faculty with wonderful success in the Operation of the *Spirit*; for, in a short time, no Doctrine pass'd for Sound and Orthodox, unless it were delivered thro' the Nose. Strait, every Pastor copy'd after this Original; and those, who could not otherwise arrive to a Perfection, spirited by a noble Zeal, made use of the same Experiment to acquire it. So that, I think, it may be truly affirmed, the *Saints* owe their Empire to the *Snuffling* of one *Animal*, as *Darius* did his, to the *Neighing* of another; and both Stratagems were performed by the same Art; for we read how the *Persian Beast** acquired his Faculty by *covering a Mare* the Day Before. (Herodotus).³⁸

Swift and the Doctors of his Time

Radcliffe was the most fashionable doctor of Queen Anne's time. Subsequent generations have reason to be grateful to him for founding the Radcliffe Infirmary at Oxford and for his benefactions to St. Bartholomew's Hospital. His strong point seems to have been blunt common sense rather than academic learning. He may perhaps have been at times a little too blunt in his dealings with his patients. We have seen that he fell out with Swift, and it is on record that when he was called to attend the Queen (when Princess Anne) he was unfortunately caught in his cups, and said publicly that her illness was merely the vapours.²⁸ She did, however, send for him when her only surviving child the young Duke of Gloucester was dying at the age of eleven. He came, unwillingly, and on hearing that the doctors in attendance had bled him he said:

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'then you have destroyed him; and you may finish him for I will not prescribe.' In spite of this, when the Queen was dying he was again sent for but replied that 'he had taken physic and could not come.'³⁹ The incident seems to have preyed on his mind, for he wrote on 7 August that 'ill as I was, I would have went to the Queen in a Horse-Litter, had either her Majesty, or those in Commission next her, commanded me to do so.' Swift did not blame him. 'I think Ratcliff acted right', he said, and he added: 'they (sent) for him at a Plunge when he could onely lose Credit. For the Qu——'s case seems not to have been the Gout in her Head, but Histericks, Convulsive or Apoplectick, but I judge at a distance. Poor Ar—— was glad to hope as long as possible.'⁴⁰ The excellent Dr. Arbuthnot summed up the Queen's final illness in his own kindly way. 'My dear mistress's days were numbered even in my imagination, and could not exceed certain limits *****', he wrote to Swift; 'I believe sleep was never more welcome to a weary traveller than death was to her.'⁴¹

Of all the doctors who attended Swift during his long life, he seems to have liked Arbuthnot best. 'There does not live a better man,' he said.⁴² He was even able to overcome his acute dislike of Scotsmen in his favour. After his return to Dublin to take up the Deanery of St. Patrick's he wrote:

My state of health none care to learn;
My life is here no soul's concern.
And, those with whom I now converse
Without a tear will tend my hearse.
Removed from kind Arbuthnot's aid,
Who knows his art but not his trade
Preferring his regard for me
Before his credit, or his fee.⁴³

In addition to being in the front rank of physicians Arbuthnot was a versatile and witty political writer, one of his claims to fame being that he was the originator of the character 'John Bull' as the personification of the Englishman. He was one of the inner circle of wits and politicians of the day and a member of Swift's famous Society of Friends which included Prior, Bolingbroke and the Dukes of Ormonde and Shrewsbury amongst its number. He was also a member of the Scriblerus Club which Swift founded in 1713–14 with Pope, Gay and Parnell as the other members. From this association rose the *Memoirs of Scriblerus* which was largely written by Arbuthnot and which is said partly to have given rise to *Gulliver's Travels* and to Pope's *Dunciad*. Arbuthnot was clearly a man of many talents, but it was his personal qualities of honesty, forthrightness, and sympathy which endeared him so greatly to his friends. He seems to have passed on a measure of his ability to his daughter Anne who is said to have written the airs for Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, which are all Scottish.

In spite of his friendship with Arbuthnot, William Cockburn (1669–1739), 'Honest Dr. Cockburn' as he calls him, seems to have been Swift's regular

* This statement was made by Charles Ford, writing to Swift. Ford said that Radcliffe had been summoned by 'order of the Council'. The *Political State*, however, says it was by the Duke of Ormonde while Radcliffe himself thought it was by Lady Masham. When he received the message he was at his country house at Carshalton where he died some three months later.

physician when he was in London. He dined with him constantly but did not always approve of the company he met there. 'I dined today with Dr. Cockburn,' he wrote on 21 January 1711, 'but will not do so again in haste, he generally has such a parcel of Scots with him.'⁴⁴ Other medical men we read about are Richard Mead, Dr. Freind, a member of the Society, and Hugh Chamberlain, or Chamberlen, the younger, a fashionable physician. His father, Hugh Chamberlen the elder, a Huguenot refugee, was a noted man-midwife and 'projector' of the Land Bank Scheme of 1690. His elder brother Peter was the inventor of the midwifery forceps, which the family managed to keep a secret for a hundred and twenty-five years by the simple expedient of concealing from the profession the fact that it had two blades.

Swift and the Charlatans

Quacks and charlatans abounded in the early eighteenth century but Swift, in spite of his valetudinarian tendencies, was always orthodox in his medical affiliations and poured scorn on herbalists and nostrum-peddlers.

I tell you a good pun [he says]; a fellow hard by pretends to cure *Agues*, and has set out a sign, and spells it *Egoes*; a gentleman and I observing it, he said, How does that fellow pretend to cure *Agues*? I said, I did not know, but I was sure it was not by a *Spell*.

'That's admirable,'⁴⁵ he adds with satisfaction. We may not think it so very funny, but puns were very fashionable at the time, and Swift loved to play with words.

The notorious Sir William Read, Oculist in Ordinary to Queen Anne, flourished at this time. He had started life as a tailor and was eventually knighted by the Queen, who had been deceived by his extravagant claims to have cured blindness in her soldiers and sailors, whom to do him justice he treated free of charge. Swift would have none of him:

Henly would fain engage me to go with Steele and Rowe, etc., to an invitation at Sir Wm Read's. Surely you have heard of him? He has been a mountebank, and is the queen's oculist: he makes admirable punch, and treats you in gold vessels. But I am engaged, and won't go, neither indeed am I fond of the jaunt.⁴⁶

Swift's dislike for charlatans extended to astrologers. The way in which he harried and finally destroyed the wretched Partridge is well known. It is delightful and entertaining reading and one would be sorry for Partridge if it were not for the fact that he richly deserved his fate. John Partridge, born John Hewson, set up as an astrologer and almanac-maker in London in 1679 or thereabouts. He was a violent Protestant and his speciality was a violent hue and cry against papists. His annual almanac, *Merlinus Liberatus*, had a considerable success until the succession of King James II when he found it advisable to fly to Holland. At the Revolution he returned to London but he now fell foul of the wits, notably Tom Brown who ridiculed him in *Prophecies out of Merlin's Carmen*, and Ned Ward who did the same in *The London Spy*. However, it was not until Swift took a hand by writing the *Bickerstaff Papers* that he was finally exposed and demolished. Swift, writing under the name of Isaac Bickerstaff, published first a mock calendar entitled *Predictions of the Year 1708* in which amongst momentous,

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far-reaching and entirely imaginary prophecies of events to take place at home and abroad a 'trifle' was interpolated. This was the blank statement that 'on the twenty-ninth of March, about eleven at night, John Partridge the almanac-maker will infallibly die of a raging fever'. Promptly on 30 March 1708 a pamphlet was hawked on the streets of London announcing the death of Partridge, and a few days later came another, *The Accomplishment of the First of Mr. Bickerstaff's Predictions* which stated that Partridge had indeed died, but not at eleven but at about five minutes past seven, 'by which it is clear that Mr. Bickerstaff was mistaken almost four hours in his calculation'. The whole town now joined in the sport of attacking, or else for variety, defending Bickerstaff. Of the pamphlets published, the gem is *Squire Bickerstaff Detected* which is said to have been written by Swift and Congreve in collaboration, and was brought to the deluded Partridge by their friend Thomas Yalken. Partridge was actually foolish enough to print it himself. It tells of the sufferings of Partridge under the persecutions of the villainous Bickerstaff; how the bellman, undertaker and sexton all turn deaf ears to his protest that he is, in fact, alive; and of the crowning indignity of his being dunned for his own funeral expenses. It is a masterpiece of serio-comic writing. Of the undertaker's visit we are told (Partridge speaking):

In the mean time, one knocks at my Door, Betty runs down, and opening, finds a sober, grave Person, who modestly inquires, if this was Dr. Partridge's? She taking him for some cautious City-Patient that came at that Time, for Privacy, shews him into the Dining-Room. As soon as I could compose my self, I went to him, and was surpriz'd to find my Gentleman mounted on a Table with a 2-Foot Rule in his Hand, measuring my Walls, and taking the Dimensions of the Room. Pray, Sir, says I, not to interrupt you, have you any Business with me? Only, Sir, replies he, Order the Girl to bring me a better Light, for this is but a very dim one. Sir, says I, my Name is Partridge: Oh, the Doctors Brother, belike, crys he; the Stair-Case, I believe, and these two Apartments hung in close Mourning, will be sufficient, and only a Strip of Bayes round the other Rooms. The Dr. must needs die Rich, he had great Dealings, in his Way, for many Years; if he had no Family-Coat, you had as good use the 'Scutcheons of the Company, they are as Showish, and will look as Magnificent as if he was descended from the Blood-Royal. With that, I assumed a greater Air of Authority, and demand who employ'd him, or how he came there? Why, I was sent, Sir, by the Company of Undertakers, says he, and they were employ'd by the honest Gentleman, who is Executor to the good Dr. departed; and our rascally Porter, I believe is fallen fast asleep with the Black Cloath, and Sconces, or he had been here, and we might have been tacking up by this Time. Sir, says I, pray be advised by a Friend, and make the best of your Speed out of my Doors, for I hear my Wife's Voice (which, by the by, is pretty distinguishable) and in that Corner of the Room stands a good Cudgel, which somebody has felt ere-now; if that light in her Hands, and she know the Business you came about, without consulting the Stars, I can assure you it will be employ'd very much to the Detriment of your Person. Sir, crys he, bowing, with great Civility, I perceive Extream Grief for the Loss of the Doctor disorders you a little at present, but early in the Morning i'll wait on you, with all necessary Materials.⁴⁷

Personal Relations with Doctors

In spite of his friendship and regard for the great doctors of his time Swift was not impressed either by their theory or their practice. At the age of seventy he said that 'he esteemed many of them as learned and ingenious men but that

he never received the least benefit from their advice or prescriptions'. And 'poor Dr. Arbuthnot' he added 'was the only man of the faculty who seemed to understand my case but could not remedy it. But to conquer five physicians, all eminent in their way was a victory that Alexander and Caesar could never pretend to.'

The five physicians referred to were Arbuthnot, Radcliffe and Cockburn of London, and Helsham and Grattan of Dublin. Of the Dublin physicians he seems to have liked Helsham best. 'I have been some months in a bad dispirited way,' he wrote sadly in 1733, 'with Deafness, and giddyness, and Fluxes. . . . I have been twice severely vomited, to the utmost I could possibly bear, but without amendment. I believe my disorder is particular, and out of the Experience of our Physicians here: Doctr. Helsham the best of them is very kind and visits me constantly. My Spirits are quite broke.'⁴⁸

Dr. Richard Helsham, Fellow and Professor of Physic in Trinity College and a member of the staff of Steevens's Hospital, was one of the most eminent physicians of his time in Dublin. In a letter to Pope Swift gives an excellent pen-picture of him:

Here is an ingenious good-humoured physician, a fine gentleman, and excellent scholar, easy in his fortunes, kind to everybody, has abundance of friends, entertains them often and liberally. They pass the evening with him at cards, with plenty of good meat and wine, eight or a dozen together. He loves them all, and they him. He has twenty or more of these at command. If one of them dies, it is no more than 'poor Tom'. He gets another, or takes up with the rest, and is no more moved than at the loss of his cat. He offends nobody, is easy with everybody. Is not this the true happy man?⁴⁹

In his last illness Swift was attended by John Nicholls, the Surgeon-General and by John Whiteway, nephew to Mrs. Whiteway, his first cousin and attendant. All the Dublin doctors were members of the staff of Dr. Steevens's Hospital of which Swift was a Governor from its foundation in 1720, and to which Stella left £1000 in her will.

Swift's Views on the Profession in General

Swift's opinion of our professional ancestors may be judged from a passage in the *Voyage to the Houyhnhnms*. Speaking to his 'Master' Gulliver says

I was going to tell him of another sort of People, who get their Liveliness by attending the sick. . . . And because I had some Skill in the Faculty* . . . I would in Gratitude to his Honour, let him know the whole Mystery and Method by which they proceed. THEIR Fundamental is, That all Diseases arise from *Repletion*, from whence they conclude, that a great *Evacuation* of the Body is necessary, either through the natural Passage, or upwards at the Mouth. Their next Business is, from Herbs, Minerals, Gums, Oyls, Shells, Salts, Juices, Seaweed, Excrements, Barks of Trees, Serpents, Toads, Frogs, Spiders, dead Mens Flesh and Bones, Beasts and Fishes, to form a Composition for Smell and Taste the most abominable, nauseous and detestable, they can possibly contrive, which the Stomach immediately rejects with loathing; and this they call a *Vomit*; or else from the same Store-house, with some other poisonous Additions, they command us to take in at the Orifice *above* or *below*, (just as the Physician then happens to be disposed) a Medicine equally annoying and disgusting to the Bowels, which relaxing the Belly, drives down all before it, and this they call a *Purge*, or a *Glyster*. For Nature (as the Physicians alledge) having intended the superior anterior Orifice only for the *intromission* of Solids and Liquids, and the inferior for Ejection, these Artists ingeniously considering that in

* Gulliver was a ship's surgeon.

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all Disease Nature is forced out of her Seat; therefore to replace her in it, the Body must be treated in a manner directly contrary, by interchanging the Use of each Orifice; forcing solids and Liquids in at the *Anus*, and making Evacuations at the Mouth.

BUT, besides real Diseases, we are subject to many that are only imaginary, for which the Physicians have invented imaginary Cures; these have their several Names, and so have the Drugs that are proper for them, and with these our Female *Yahoos* are always infested.

ONE great Excellency in this Tribe is their Skill at *Prognosticks*, wherein they seldom fail; their Predictions in real Diseases, when they rise to any Degree of Malignity, generally portending *Death*, which is always in their Power, when Recovery is not: And therefore, upon any unexpected Signs of Amendment, after they have pronounced their Sentence, rather than be accused as false Prophets, they know how to approve their Sagacity to the World by a seasonable Dose.⁵¹

If he had a poor opinion of doctors, Swift thought even less of politicians, and he does our profession the honour of suggesting that it might be able to regulate their activities and correct their aberrations. He says:

For instance; Whereas all Writers and Reasoners have agreed, that there is a strict universal Resemblance between the Natural and the Political Body; can there be any thing more evident, than that the health of both must be preserved, and the Diseases cured by the same Prescription? It is allowed, that Senates and great Councils are often troubled with redundant, ebullient, and other peccant Humours, with many Diseases of the Head, and more of the Heart; with strong Convulsions, with grievous Contractions of the Nerves and Sinews in both Hands, but especially the Right: With Spleen, Flatus, Vertigos and Deliriums; with Scrophulous Tumours full of faetid purulent Matter; with sower frothy Ructations, with Canine Appetites and crudeness of Digestion, besides many others needless to mention. This Doctor therefore proposed, that upon the meeting of a Senate, certain Physicians should attend at the three first Days of their sitting, and at the Close of each days Debate, feel the Pulses of every Senator; after which having maturely considered, and consulted upon the Nature of the several Maladies, and the method of Cure, they should on the fourth Day return to the Senate House, attended by their Apothecaries stored with proper Medicines, and before the Members sate, administer to each of them Lenitives, Aperitives, Abstersives, Corrosives, Restringtons, Palliatives, Laxatives, Cephalalgicks, Ictericks, Apophlegmaticks, Acousticks, as their several cases required, and according as these Medicines should operate, repeat, alter, or omit them at the next Meeting.

THIS Project could not be of any great Expence to the Publick, and would in my poor opinion, be of much Use for the Dispatch of Business in those Countries where Senates have any share in the Legislative Power, beget Unanimity, shorten Debates, open a few Mouths which are now closed, and close many more which are now open; curb the Petulancy of the Young, and correct the Positiveness of the Old; rouze the Stupid, and damp the Pert.

AGAIN, Because it is a general Complaint that the Favourites of Princes are troubled with short and weak Memories; the same Doctor proposed, that whoever attended a First Minister, after having told his business with the utmost Brevity, and in the plainest Words; should at his Departure give the said Minister a Tweak by the Nose, or a kick in the Belly, or tread on his Corns, or lug him thrice by both Ears, or run a Pin into his Breech, or pinch his Arm black and blew, to prevent Forgetfulness: and at every Levee Day repeat the same Operation, till the Business were done or absolutely refused.

HE likewise directed, that every Senator in the great Council of a Nation, after he had delivered his Opinion, and argued in the Defence of it, should be obliged to give his Vote directly contrary; because if that were done, the Result would infallibly terminate in the Good of the Publick.

WHEN Parties in a State are violent, he offered a wonderful Contrivance to reconcile them. The Method is this. You take an Hundred Leaders of each Party, you dispose of them into Couples of such whose Heads are nearest of a size; then let two nice Operators saw off the *Occiput* of each

Couple at the same time, in such a manner that the Brain may be equally divided. Let the *Occiputs* thus cut off be interchanged, applying each to the Head of his opposite Party-man. It seems indeed to be a Work that requireth some exactness, but the Professor assured us, that if it were dextrously performed, the Cure would be infallible. For he argued thus; that the two half Brains being left to debate the Matter between themselves within the space of one Scull, would soon come to a good Understanding, and produce that Moderation as well as Regularity of thinking, so much to be wished for in the Heads of those, who imagine they come into the World only to watch and govern its Motion: And as to the difference of Brains in Quantity or Quality, among those who are directors in Faction; the Doctor assured us from his own knowledge, that it was a perfect Trifle.⁵²

Swift's Interest in the Insane

All his life Swift was interested in the subject of insanity; first in an abstract, later in a practical way. He wrote the 'Digression Concerning Madness' in *A Tale of a Tub* when he was still under thirty, and later we know he became a Governor of Bedlam. Perhaps his greatest, certainly his most lasting benefaction to mankind came out of this interest, and it is indeed ironical that his reward should be that future generations came to the entirely erroneous conclusion that he was himself insane.

In the 'Digression Concerning Madness', *A Tale of a Tub* reaches its climax and Swift his greatest satirical heights. Running through the 'Digression' as a general theme is an insistence that lunacy is universal with, as overtones, repeated variations of the statement that lunacy is a psychopathological inversion, a self-imposed evil offering irresistible pleasures of self-deception. All great achievements are due to an access of insanity; madness causes revolutions in empire, in philosophy, in religion.

For, the Brain, he says, in its natural Position and State of Serenity, disposeth its Owner to pass his life in the common Forms, without any Thought of subduing Multitudes to his own Power, his Reasons, or his Visions. . . . But when a Man's Fancy gets *astride* on his Reason, when imagination is at Cuffs with the Senses, and common Understanding, as well as common Sense, is Kickt out of Doors; the first Proselyte he makes, is Himself, and when that is one compass'd, the Difficulty is not so great in bringing over others; a strong Delusion always operating from without, as vigorously as from *within*. Those Entertainments and Pleasures we most value in Life, are such as *Dupe* and play the Wag with the Senses. For if we take an Examination of what is generally understood by *Happiness* . . . it is a *perpetual Possession of being well Deceived*.⁵³

He goes on to consider and brood over the deceptiveness of outer appearances. The senses are content to enjoy looking at the fair outer covering, reason insists on cutting through to realities. 'Last week I saw a Woman flay'd, and you will hardly believe, how much it altered her Person for the worse.' This is in fact the burden of Swift's philosophy of life. We should not, it is true, indulge in speculation outside the limits of common sense. Credulity, he says, is one of the greatest blessings, but nevertheless the search for moral truth beneath the trappings of false coverings is the prime function of reason.

Yesterday I ordered the carcass of a beau to be stripped in my presence, when we were all amazed to find so many unsuspected faults under one suit of clothes. Then I laid open his brain, his heart, and his spleen, but I plainly perceived at every operation that the farther we proceeded we found the defects increase upon us in number and bulk. . . .

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Having thus made his point, Swift goes on to give ironically detailed instructions as to how lunatics may be made useful citizens of the commonwealth. Dangerous and belligerent lunatics must be packed off to the war in Flanders, the babbler must be sent to Westminster Hall, while the one who spent his time gabbling meaningless compliments to all and sundry should be sent to the Court of St. James's, where by his talent of flattery he would soon outshine the whole Court.

Beneath the elaborate irony of this 'Digression' one seems to detect that Swift, against the common thought of his time, had at least an inkling that insanity is in many instances curable. Whether this is so or not he seems to have taken an ever-increasing interest in the dreadful plight of the insane in his time. This interest culminated in the establishment of St. Patrick's Hospital for the Insane, better known to the people of Dublin as Swift's Hospital. Characteristically, he belied his motives:

He gave what little wealth he had
To build a house for fools and mad;
And show'd by one satiric touch,
No nation needed it so much.⁵⁴

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VESALIUS 1514–1564

Special Issue: October 1964

The October issue of *Medical History* will be devoted to the life and work of Vesalius and his contemporaries, in honour of the four-hundredth anniversary of the death of the great anatomist, whose portrait decorates the cover of the present volume. A special exhibition has also been prepared by the Wellcome Historical Medical Library which is open to the public between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. daily except Saturdays and Sundays.