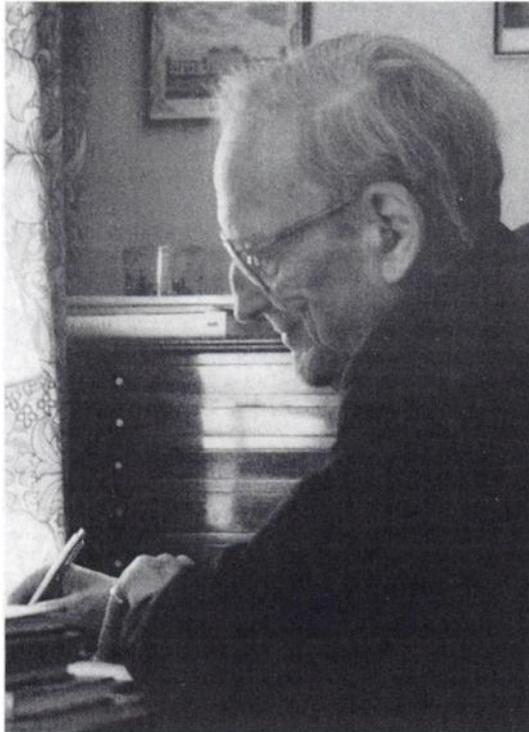


# Charles Rycroft

*In conversation with Jeremy Holmes*



Charles Rycroft

Dr Charles Rycroft was born near Basingstoke in 1914. He was educated at Wellington College and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was an Exhibitioner. He trained in medicine at University College Hospital, qualifying in 1945, and in psychoanalysis at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, qualifying in 1947. During the 1950s he held numerous offices at the British Psycho-Analytical Society. During the 1960s he started writing, publishing *Anxiety and Neurosis*, *Imagination and Reality*, and *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* in 1968. In 1973 he was retrospectively elected a Founding Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Since then he has continued to write and see patients, his best known later books being *The Innocence of Dreams* (1979) and *Psychoanalysis and Beyond* (1985).

*Let's start by talking about your background and how you got into this sort of work?*

My background: lower upper class. I was my mother's second son and my father's fifth child. My father's first wife had died, and there were two half brothers both of whom I knew really quite well. One 17 years older than me and one 28 years older than me.

*You were quite well equipped to understand the complications of family life?*

Yes indeed, I can still remember very easily all these halves and steps and all the rest of it. I had a nephew when I was born, and we lived in this country house in Hampshire with an estate

attached with tenant farmers and one farm which my father farmed himself. He was much older than my mother, 23 years older and he died when I was 11. And there are traumas attached to that as you can imagine. Then we went to live with my maternal grandfather for a while and then we were put into the dower house of quite a remote cousin of ours. I have never been able to work out why cousin Musette was a cousin of ours but she was. And as a result we had access to the estate, gardens and so on, which was rather nice. As a younger son I was destined for the army. My eldest brother was going to inherit the title and the estate. When father died he stepped into his shoes. A lot of the land had to be sold but he and his wife did take over the house. My mother minded that terribly. And so we moved into the dower house of a rather beautiful place called Hedingham Castle which is still a private house and has a Norman keep which we used to roller skate in. But in actual fact that wasn't very nice, none of us was happy there. My mother remained a widow and never showed any signs of remarriage. Her children would have liked her to and said so. I encouraged her as I think that I

realised that she was missing something as I was missing something.

*So you were quite attuned to her?*

She survived until I was 67. There was a certain rapport between us. Then I went to Wellington which was an army school and when I was 16 or 17 I started having terrible doubts about this – did I really want to go into the army and so on – I eventually decided no. I thought I was going to have a terrible struggle about this but in actual fact my mother was terribly relieved that I had taken the moral responsibility for going against my father's wishes not her. My father had already died at this point, but I had been down for Wellington practically before I was born. Anyway that was an anti-climax. I've had a lot of anti-climaxes in my life in which one is all set to have a struggle but the opposition has all been paper opposition really. So then I decided I wanted to go to Oxford. And I was told that was really quite impossible, all my father's and mother's family had always been to Cambridge. I gave way on that. I was not sure what I intended to do when I went up to Cambridge. I read Economics Part 1, for which I got a bad first, I got a 1:2. However, nobody got a 1:1. They did it on purpose, they could have just said first class, couldn't they? But it was first class, second division.

*Anyway you were a clever young man?*

Yes, I wasn't really recognised at Wellington as being clever. In fact, I did put in a claim that I should be allowed to work for a scholarship and I was told I had left it too late. Anyway I went up as a commoner and I got an exhibition at the end of my first year. But before then, in 1933, I went to Germany for 6 months. It was much cheaper in those days the way the exchange rate worked. It was much easier on economic grounds to keep a son in Germany than in public school in England.

*So you were sent, it wasn't your choice. Were you interested to go to Germany?*

I certainly didn't protest against it and who first suggested it I really have no idea. But that was the 6 months that Hitler came to power and when persecution of the Jews started. It was the only time I have ever seen people shooting each other in the street. Some of the bullets were blank cartridges but I wasn't to know that. But at any rate that was quite an education and I was convinced it was going to go on and all sorts of dreadful things were going to happen.

*Have you always had an interest in politics and history?*

When I went up to Cambridge I would have called myself a Conservative. I think that had I retained

the ideas my parents believed in I would have ended up a conservative wet and not a Thatcherite. There was some idea around that you should treat people decently. And when I got to Cambridge I discovered that I was automatically assumed to be in a rather superior elite of the very bright who were going to get a first and so on. I was amazed by this, and everyone was reading Freud and everyone was reading Marx. I'd never heard of Freud until I got to Cambridge. Then a group of 20 or so of us went to Russia in 1935. And then in 1936 or 1937 three of us from Cambridge applied to train at the Institute, two were accepted but I was the only one who ended up an analyst.

*We've gone from communism and some degree of disillusionment with communism, to applying to the Institute. What happened in those two years?*

Well, I was accepted after being interviewed by Jones and Glover on condition I did medicine. It took me a year or so to decide but I eventually agreed to do so. Choosing psychoanalysis as a career was a radical thing to do in those days. My tutor and my supervisor were quite exercised and my supervisor went to discuss my case with Lord Adrian who thought psychoanalysis was a very good idea provided I did medicine.

*Can we talk about your interest in history, because there is in almost everything you write a sense of history or context.*

That started very early. As a child I used to read history books. In fact I've gone through every phase of being interested in history, from personal anecdotes about royalty through to Marxism and sociology and trade cycles and all the rest. This historical perspective informs a lot of my writing, which is unusual among analysts.

*So you started training as an analyst and as a medical student more or less on the same day? Was this a strange thing to do?*

Unique I would guess. My analysis with Ella Sharpe never got anywhere actually. In fact, she was worried enough about it to send me off to discuss things with Glover. I had no choice in who my analyst was. I was allocated to Ella Sharpe and when she left London I was allocated to Sylvia Payne. Sharpe treated me as though I was a rare bird. I got the feeling that she'd never encountered anyone like me before. Whether that was actually true I don't know but with Sylvia Payne it was the other way. I was quite sure she had met lots of people like me and I wasn't unfamiliar territory. Ella Sharpe had a portentous way of talking which may have put me off more than I realised at the time and she worried about me, I could tell. For example, I once failed to arrive at a session because I had muddled the times and

when I went down from my flat to go belatedly to my session there she was, on the street outside looking for me. That was worrying!

*Was there a conflict between being in analysis and being a medical student? There is much discussion about the psychological impact of medical training: is medical training a training in insensitivity, shutting off from one's feelings, while psychoanalytic training is the opposite?*

I had already been influenced by psychoanalysis before I got to see patients. I think I got on rather well with patients actually. I do remember the occasional arguments with consultants on ward rounds, there was an exact contemporary of mine who was much more militantly pro-analysis, Harold Bourne. He and I were a bit of a team and we used to put the psychological point of view forward. You might call it tact or moral cowardice but he aroused more opposition than I did. And he was very aware of the fact. In fact he wrote me a letter not so very long ago saying that I had spent my life provoking other people into being more obviously militant than I admitted to being.

*There is something slightly surprising when one reads about, say the 'gentleman's agreement' and all the discussions in the Psycho-Analytic Society, to think that all that was taking place while the war was on.*

Whether it was an accident or Payne's tact, I really didn't know anything about these confidential discussions. When Mansfield House was being bought I ended up on the Committee as a student representative but they had more meetings than I was invited to because they discussed money at the meetings I was not at.

*Shall we come onto when you qualified as an analyst? When did you start to feel that you were part of the Analytic Society?*

I started seeing patients in private practice before I qualified as an analyst. That was because my first wife got pregnant and there was the question of raising money. There was a great shortage of analysts and I had the overflow from Payne's practice and from Winnicott's practice. When I qualified I didn't have a single vacancy. I wrote a paper to get my full membership; it never occurred to me not to do that, I now realise that some people rather astutely refused to. Soon after I became a full member somebody rang me up and said they were desperate to find somebody to be Training Secretary and would I do it, it was absolutely essential that I should do it as there was nobody else. This was while I was packing to go away on holiday and I rather weakly said all right I'll do it and that was the beginning of my administrative service. I was very annoyed about

it. Looking back on it I was quite good at administration, but I don't think that was really my gift. Have you ever read a book by Francis Cornford who was a Professor of Classics at Cambridge, explaining the ways in which the academic establishment tries to stop people being creative? If you see someone really bright you might make them a professor and give them masses of administration and make sure they never do anything creative again.

*So did you have a sense of being nurtured in the way that you would have liked within the Society?*

On the whole not. In fact I had the feeling that it was the other way round, that young people weren't nurtured by older people but used by them as tools and servants and disciples. That was true not only of Klein, which was very obvious, but of Winnicott as well. I remember going to some child seminars that Winnicott was giving and I said something, and suddenly realised that was *my* thought and not an extension of Winnicott's thought and wondering how he would take it; I was not invited to the next term.

I went into analysis again at some point with Payne, I was incredibly angry with her. Looking back I thought that she had allowed something that was bad for me to happen, that she could have easily have said 'leave Charles Rycroft alone for a few years' and she didn't. I was told later she was terribly upset by my being so angry. In a way I had a meteoric career within the Society, which in retrospect I feel wasn't particularly good for me.

*Can you tell me about the '1952 Club'.*

The 1952 Club was the descendant of a dining club which met once a month to discuss analytical topics. Its members were Masud Khan, Jim Armstrong Harris, Barbara Woodhead, Pearl King and myself. Although all the original members were middle group there was (is) nothing in the rules stipulating this, and in fact there have been occasional Kleinian and contemporary Freudian members. When I ceased to be a member of the British Psychoanalytical Society the rules of the 1952 Club had to be altered to allow me to continue to be a member. The idea of the 1952 Club was to provide a forum where (a) its members could try out papers they were writing before presenting them to BPAS, and (b) leading analysts could be invited to explain, expound, their ideas in a more relaxed atmosphere than that provided by the BPAS. I have heard people mention the 52 Club as though it were influential and prestigious but I have no idea whether this was ever true. I only rarely attend nowadays. Its members now are much older than the original group – in 1952 I was 38 and Masud was 28.

*I also want to ask you about your time at the Maudsley. What were your feelings about psychiatry at that stage?*

I got into the Maudsley on the strength of my pre-medical academic career which Aubrey Lewis was terribly impressed with. And I think he was impressed by my accent. And I wasn't frightened of him. Lots of other people were, people had awful dreams about him. I lived in at the Maudsley so I knew all my fellow house physicians. It was just after the war and the Maudsley was much smaller than it is now. It had a lot of very ambitious people but as I knew I was going to become an analyst in private practice, the question of ambition didn't arise. My consultant was Eric Guttman. He knew his neurology and his psychopathology, and was enormously talkative. He had a wife called Elizabeth Rosenberg who eventually became Elizabeth Zetzel, the analyst, author of *The so called good hysteric*. Another analyst, Gillespie, was at the Maudsley but I don't think I had much to do with him. And Denis Hill: I always rather liked Denis Hill, in fact I could always understand what he was talking about which wasn't true of all of them. Clifford Scott: I could never understand a word of what he was talking about.

*You were going to the Maudsley to expose yourself to a bit of psychiatry?*

That was the idea, I didn't quite say that to Aubrey Lewis, it wouldn't have been tactful. I should have stayed on a bit longer in psychiatry I think now. Although I also regret that I hadn't become more involved in medicine. I should have done two or three internships rather than one and a couple of years of psychiatry rather than 6 months. In fact I did more than 6 months in psychiatry because I did locums in the City of London Mental Hospital in Kent. It was one of those places in which people paid fees but they were heavily subsidised. I think it cost £5 per week to keep a relative in reasonable comfort. An elder brother of one of my form masters at Wellington was a patient there for 20 years, it kept him away from boys.

*So you spent this time at the Maudsley but knew all along that you were going to settle for private practice*

In 1947 I started my practice and became an associate member and in 1949 I became a full member. I had already written a paper on the dream screen as I had a patient who had really rather startling material and I gather everybody agrees that I was right, that dream screens are part of their manic defence and aren't just simply remembering the breast. I went to seminars by Winnicott and Klein one year. She was terribly

dogmatic. The patient I used to present to the Klein seminar, when he finished he thanked me very much and he said you know, there were those cuckoo interpretations you sometimes made, and these were the ones that Melanie Klein had told me to make. She had this central European thing of saying *must* when English people say "I rather think you should". There was a kind of war going on between the Kleinians and the rest. It took me some time to realise how serious they all were. They all thought they were right.

*What were the good things that were going on in the Society in the 1950s, where were the intellectual growth points and what were the not so good things that were going on?*

The Society meetings were a bad thing because everybody used to get up and repeat themselves. At this time I'm told I was making reasonable contributions to the discussion and thinking it was my duty as Scientific Secretary to do so. I became Scientific Secretary in 1956, for two years only. At the centenary celebrations of Freud's birth in 1956 there was to be a scientific meeting and I was asked to read a paper and agreed. Sylvia Payne told me the names of the people who would not accept the invitation to speak so I knew there were two other people higher up on the list than me. That was a mistake on her part. If you ask somebody to do something you don't tell them you're third choice. Quite innocent on her part, I'm sure but there was a party afterwards at Maresfield Gardens and these analysts were gathered from all over the world and I did not want anything to do with them. I thought, I'm going to make a strategic withdrawal and that's what I did, because I had people in training and it would have been very difficult for them.

*So you were a training analyst?*

That's right. My first two training cases had to wait until I was senior enough to become a training analyst in order to become candidates.

*So who were the people who influenced you in a helpful way?*

Winnicott, it has to be said, helped me. I found him quite irritating but he was human and he had a sense of humour and I always found his stuff easy to read. Lots of analysts found him difficult to read but I have no idea why, his work has always struck me as perfectly straightforward English. I didn't have supervision from him. I was supervised by Marion Milner who was very helpful and my first case did very well, that's always very nice. My second case was a total waste of time and that was partly my supervisor's fault, Helen Sheehan-Dare. I told her that I thought the man was schizophrenic and I wouldn't be able to

help him but we went ahead nonetheless and I really don't think that either he or I learnt anything at all.

I also had a pre-first case: there was one patient who announced himself cured about 6 weeks after I had started and indeed he had lost all his symptoms. It was all very impressive, a bit of brief therapy, before brief therapy was fashionable. His mother died when he was five or six – and we got access to this very quickly, whether there was something in me or in him, but we got onto the grief side, and people didn't talk about grief much in those days.

*I suppose that brings us back to your father's death? Has that influenced you a lot?*

Yes, one of the most successful cases I have ever had defeated two other analysts. He lost his father and mother within a fortnight from quite different causes when he was five and I had been able to go right through all that with him. I believe it was because I was acquainted with grief. I think as one grows older one thinks about one's father more, I certainly do more than I did 20 years ago. And he had a twinkle in his eye. Grief and loss weren't major themes in those years even though Melanie Klein wrote quite a lot about loss and herself experienced a lot of loss. It was Bowlby who really put grief on the map. He was active in the Society and also to some extent withdrawing from it at roughly the same time as me. I don't remember much of the things he said but I've always been very sympathetic towards his attitude.

*So you started to make this strategic withdrawal, did anybody notice? Was anyone trying to drag you back in?*

Not seriously. I did offer my resignation in the 1960s. I wrote a letter and the Training Committee deputed one of its members, Tom Hayley, to take me out to dinner and persuade me to withdraw my resignation which he succeeded in doing. My writing career began to take off at this time and it all got very complicated; I was appointed to the Tavistock, having Laing as a patient, my knowing that I was going to withdraw from the movement, my marriage breaking up. Then Sutherland departing and persuading me to take on his one training case, which delayed my withdrawal. Then the *Observer* started using me for reviews. That didn't endear me to the analytic movement at all. I was inspected by David Astor to see if I was a suitable person. I was passed, and then discovered that some people thought I should write good reviews on all books on analysis. I didn't take that view at all and ended up with the support of Terrence Kilmartin who was the literary editor writing independent reviews. Kurt Eissler wrote me an incredibly rude

letter saying I wasn't doing my job properly. Although recently he wrote to apologise.

*Did you ever consider giving up analysis altogether?*

Whether I envisaged giving up patients altogether I am not sure but I certainly envisaged half time analytical practice and half time writing and that never really worked out. I have never earned more than £3000 in any one year from writing, and one has children and wives and one has to earn more than that. But if I had given up patients it would have been a mistake, they were the stimulus to my writing.

*When did your Critical Dictionary come out?*

1968, there is a new edition just out. I used to jokingly say that it was going to be my farewell present to the analytical movement. But it hasn't worked out that way. On the whole it established me as a member of the analytical movement despite myself and psychiatry too. And I presume I owe my FRCPsych to the *Dictionary*.

*How do you see psychiatry today and its relation to psychotherapy?*

Well, I am a bit out of date. But I think psychiatrists should know about psychotherapy and of course I don't take the view that psychoanalysis is the only form of treatment there is. I suspect drugs are over used, over prescribed, and I gather that there are psychiatrists around who don't think it's necessary to make rapport with their patients, just to get the list of symptoms and then think what drug to prescribe. I have had more vivid accounts of that from America than England. In the 1940s and 1950s very few people went to see psychiatrists. In England people left it too long before they went to see psychiatrists and in America they went too soon. That still seems to be true, doesn't it?

*What are the core values that you hold dear within psychotherapy?*

Authenticity and communication; so many cliché words: making contact with a patient, empathy, imagination, all these things.

*What do you think about the austere analyst image and how important are boundaries?*

A certain reserve is necessary. I have always taken the view that I am quite prepared to say things about myself but not about children, wives, parents, etc. I also think one gives away much more by one's voice, the way one talks, than most analysts realise. Tone of voice is important. That's one of the things emphasised by David Stern and Colwyn Trevarthen. They

both use musical metaphors. With Daniel Stern, I thought that he was using musical metaphors before he realised he was doing it. Neither Freud nor Jung were interested in music.

*Do you think there is still a radical core in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy?*

There should be and there is in my thinking. The essence of it is a certain scepticism about all perceived values including all perceived ideas about institutions. In the 1950s I knew Hoffer quite well, because I was assistant editor of the *International Journal*, and when I got fed up with that and resigned he sympathised with me and was very nice about it. But he once told me "of course the trouble with psychoanalysis is they're leaving the clothing trade for the unclothing trade", by which he meant it had become possible to make money as an analyst and the people who became analysts became analysts not because they had a feel for it but because it was a respectable career move. One has to be a bit ironical about the accreditation and the professionalisation of psychotherapy because there is no way in which you can stop two people talking to one another and on occasion paying. I mean it's a bit like prostitution, there's no way of stopping it.

*What advice would you give to a young psychiatrist or psychotherapist who wanted to write about their subject?*

I have a very different attitude towards writing than the average analyst. I've noticed that: (a) I enjoy doing it and (b) I have very little need to show it to other people before it is sent in to be published. A lot of people when they wrote papers would take them round to umpteen people to look at to try and make sure it was right and they would agonise and re-write it.

*So really you're very self-confident in your writing?*

Yes I suppose so. It does appear to be done with another bit of my brain, not the one I normally use and I write fairly fast. There are two things that are very important about writing which I recommend to people. One is imagine who you are talking to when you are writing and the second is, when you have to break off, always break off in the middle of a sentence not at the end of a sentence because by the time one has worked out what it was one wanted to say in the middle of a sentence, one has got oneself back into the mood.

*One of the things people might say about your writing is that you've got a very distinctive voice.*

Yes, I am sure that's right because I half hear myself.

*You speak as though writing came naturally to you.*

As a child I used to write short stories for the family and read them aloud. They were much appreciated, except at some point they became incredibly indiscreet and I was just doing send-ups of people and they were all suppressed. All torn up, I haven't got copies of them.

*Well that brings me onto another thing which is perhaps a Rycroft thing and that's indiscretion.*

I think one of the functions of old age is to be indiscreet. Sylvia Payne told me all sorts of things about the generation of analysts before her.

*This is something that Adam Phillips writes rather well about: gossip and psychoanalysis. Do you think there is something in that, because the analytic world is incredibly gossipy? Perhaps all professional worlds are?*

No, I think it is more because the taboos about what one is allowed to gossip about are greater. At one time it did annoy me that remarks one had made circulated with great speed.

*What do you think are the important qualities a psychotherapist or a psychiatrist should have?*

One has to combine a kind of ordinariness of nature with imagination. Lots of novelists you would think would make rather good analysts, wouldn't because they are so disorganised and the idea of them working to a timetable is quite inconceivable. And the ideal analyst would have done an A Level in both English Literature and Biology.

*Throughout your writing there are asides about the importance of biology. You even once accused a colleague of hardly knowing where babies actually come from.*

Like the analyst's wife who rang up a friend of mine and said she was absolutely terrified, that big birds were lying about in her drawing room. She had just bought a cat and had no idea that cats brought in birds and deposited them as gifts.

*How often ought people come for treatment?*

I think they should decide. It depends on their psychology and where they live – I could want a patient to come and see me once a fortnight. No-one comes more than four times a week. I often wonder what would happen if somebody persuaded me that they really ought to come seven times a week, whether I would feel I had to.

*Do you mean that it would be consistent with your principles that they have to decide?*

Well that's not quite right: to insist that they decide. After all one reserves the right to comment on what they decide. Also they may change their mind.

*But I think you were talking about continuity in a wide sense, not simply continuity from session to session?*

Yes, my present wife remarked that I was quite prepared to use the word recent to refer to anything that had happened within the last hundred years. But we live in a very ahistorical world. People don't seem to realise how far back things go.

*And do you feel that people are saying things now which have been said many times before without realising it?*

Oh yes indeed.

*Do you have any professional regrets?*

Sometimes when people say 'Do you think your life has been a success?', I say 'A qualified success'. I could have become a writer I think rather than an analyst, perhaps there's a regret that hasn't happened. I don't think that I have regrets about not having ended up as President of the British Psycho-Analytic Society, in fact I do remember thinking if I am not careful I shan't be able to prevent people making me. At some point it was bound to happen, particularly as at one time the refugee community on the whole took the view that they were guests of the British Society and therefore shouldn't throw their weight about too much. Klein was not a refugee.

*Going back to the Psycho-Analytic Society, is it your impression that it is changing with the times?*

My impression is that people are rather nicer than they used to be. But every now and then somebody tells me a story which makes me think there really is something quite as wrong as there ever was. I went to a book launch at Mansfield House and a publishing representative unburdened herself on how impossible the British Psycho-Analytic Society was to negotiate with and she had never met a group of people who so avoided responsibility so much and referred one to somebody else. She was so delighted at having a sympathetic audience that she presented me with a copy of the book.

*How would you contrast the British with the American psychoanalytic scene?*

I haven't been there, but I suspect that I would think the American psychiatric scene even more

ghastly than the British. Hoffer always said my trouble was that I was anti-American and I was reacting against the increasing Americanisation of British psychoanalysis.

*What about your life now? I get the impression you are still seeing patients?*

Yes. I do about 20 hours a week. I could do a little bit more if I tried.

*Do you see yourself retiring?*

No, fading out. What I mean is a certain number of people do come and see one because they saw one before and I suppose the time will come in which one will never receive a new case.

*There is one person we haven't talked about and that's Fairbairn. I wonder if you would like to say anything about him because you had quite a correspondence with him?*

I have already written down what I think about Fairbairn, look up my *Dictionary* and there it all is and the article about Guntrip in *Psychoanalysts and Beyond* which is also about Fairbairn. I was quite friendly with Nicholas you know for a while. Poor man. Grossly deprived child. Father deprivation and mother deprivation in equally large doses and his panache was all to cover that up.

*A lot of what you have said is critical of psychoanalysis. As a historian, do you think things might have turned out differently?*

The splits and malaises of the British and indeed all Psycho-Analytical Societies derive from Freud's determination to found a Movement, something 'superior' to the existing disciplines of psychiatry, neurology, psychotherapy and psychology. As a result, psychoanalysis lost its contacts with these disciplines and ceased to be criticised and monitored by them; and because of its isolation it had to have internal feuds instead of engaging in controversies with these other disciplines. When I got involved with psychoanalysis in the late 1930s, the BPAS was more a coterie, a clique with family squabbles rather than an adult profession.

*I am ending with a question I should probably have asked at the beginning which is what were your reactions to the idea of being interviewed in this way?*

I was amazed.