

# The odd couple: the partnership of J. C. Bucknill and D. H. Tuke

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On the opening page of Daniel Hack Tuke's 1892 *Dictionary of Psychological Medicine*, is a statement which reads:

Dedicated to John Charles Bucknill, M.D. Lond. F.R.C.P., F.R.S., Late Lord Chancellor's Visitor in Lunacy, First Editor of the 'Journal of Mental Science', and an early and strenuous worker in the field of psychological medicine.

Why did Tuke single out Bucknill for special praise? The answer lies partly in the fact that, some 32 years earlier, the two men had been responsible for one of the first and most influential textbooks of psychiatry. Bucknill & Tuke's *A Manual of Psychological Medicine* initially appeared in 1858. It ran to four editions and dominated British psychiatry for nearly a quarter of a century. This book formed the basis for Tuke's later, more ambitious 1892 project, and, just as the *Dictionary* has been seen as a mirror of the preoccupations of British psychiatry at the end of the 19th century, so the *Manual* can be viewed as a reflection of the concerns of mid-century. What do we know about the relationship between Tuke and his co-author? The short answer is: very little. As several commentators (e.g. Hare, 1987) have observed, we are lacking in detailed biographies of many of the leading members of the psychiatric profession in the 19th century. Turner (1991) has suggested that the paucity of information available is a reflection of the comparatively poor standing that alienists enjoyed during this period. This paper will examine what sources are available concerning Bucknill and Tuke, and what they tell us about the relationship between the two men.

## Sources

First, there are the official obituaries in the medical journals and newspapers (*British Medical Journal*, 1895, 1897; *Ireland*, 1895; *Lancet*, 1895, 1897; *The Times*, 1895, 1897; Clapham, 1897) and the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1909). Second, there is the *Journal of Mental Science*, with its news concerning the asylum profession and the meetings of the Medico-Psychological Association (MPA). Third, there

are the extensive writings of the two men themselves, which, however, reveal little about their personal lives. Searches in the College archives, in the records of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, in the archives of the Friend's Society concerning Tuke, and in the archives of Devon County concerning Bucknill, have proved largely fruitless. A proposed biography of Bucknill by his eldest son mentioned in one of the obituaries (Clapham, 1897) never appears to have been published. Attempts to persuade Bucknill to record his personal experiences during his lifetime were unsuccessful, and Tuke, likewise, seems to have been reticent about recording personal details. In the secondary literature sporadic references are made to the two men, for example by Walk (1953, 1978); Walk & Walker (1961); Hunter & MacAlpine (1963); Scull (1979, 1993); Clark (1981, 1988); Hare (1987); Bynum (1989, 1991); Oppenheim (1991) and in the two recent volumes on British psychiatry (Berrios & Freeman, 1991; Freeman & Berrios, 1996), but no comprehensive account has been undertaken.

## An odd couple

Given this meagre harvest of biographical material, what is most striking is how different the two men were. In physique and in personality, Bucknill and Tuke were polar opposites. Whereas Bucknill was tall – he measured over 6 ft – and heavily built, Tuke was short and thin. While Bucknill was described as “commanding in presence and authoritative in manner” (Clapham, 1897), Tuke was “of nervous temperament and very quick and alert in his motions” (Ireland, 1895). Whereas Bucknill relished outdoor activities: shooting, fishing, fox-hunting and marching and drilling with the First Exeter and Devonshire Rifle Volunteers; Tuke preferred more sedentary pursuits such as reading and studying old engravings. In politics, Bucknill was a Conservative, while Tuke sympathised with the Radicals, such as John Bright. In religion, Bucknill was Church of England, whereas Tuke was a Quaker. Bucknill was outspoken in his opinions and enjoyed heated debate. One

euphemistic obituarist observed that his "views did not always commend themselves to his medical confreres" (Clapham, 1897) while another, less inhibited commentator described Bucknill as a "controversialist . . . of far too extreme views, expressed at times in language overstrained" (*British Medical Journal*, 1897). In contrast, Tuke tried to avoid conflict, favouring a more conciliatory approach: "he wanted the aggressiveness of disposition which is needed to make a man skilful in repartee" (Ireland, 1895), judged one colleague. Bucknill had a fiery temper and even his own son felt that he was "a difficult man to understand" (Clapham, 1897). Accounts of Tuke stress his good nature, his geniality and his general affability. And yet, despite their obvious differences, the two men remained friends for 40 years. More particularly, they worked together to produce the *Manual of Psychological Medicine* and saw it through four editions. A brief consideration of the careers of the two men prior to the first edition in 1858 may help to explain this paradox.

John Charles Bucknill was born in 1817 at Market Bosworth in Leicestershire. He studied medicine at London University and qualified at the age of 23. He initially worked as a surgeon in private practice in Chelsea, but his health broke down and he was advised to find work in a sunnier climate. The nature of his illness is not stated but Hare (1987) has suggested that phthisis was suspected. Whatever the cause of his ailment, Bucknill managed to obtain the post of medical superintendent of the recently built county asylum at Exminster in Devon in 1844. Oppenheim (1991) has observed that breakdowns in health were a common occurrence among Victorian doctors, and that asylum work offered a readily obtainable alternative for such medical casualties. Judging by the reports of the Commissioners in Lunacy and the Board of the Asylum, Bucknill was a success in his new post, and his initiative to board out patients to nearby cottages was particularly praised. It was clear, however, that he found the work difficult and demanding, as he was to confess in his Presidential Address to the MPA in 1860:

. . . he who efficiently discharges the arduous functions attendant on the care and treatment of the insane, dwells in a morbid atmosphere of thought and feeling, a perpetual 'Walpurgis Night' of lurid delusion, the perils of which he, who walks through even the most difficult paths of sane human effort, can little appreciate (Bucknill, 1860).

In the same address he complained that the work was poorly paid and was viewed with antipathy by the general public. Bucknill had joined the asylum profession at an early stage in its evolution and he was to play a significant part in its development. He was one of the founders of

the new journal for the emerging speciality, and in 1852 he became the first editor of the *Asylum Journal*, a post he held for 10 years. Walk (1978) has credited Bucknill with changing the journal's name to the *Journal of Mental Science*. During his editorship, he contributed 68 signed articles and was responsible for ensuring that the journal was regularly published, a task made more difficult by his location in Devon, many miles from the capital. In Bucknill's own opinion an important accomplishment of the journal in its early years was to have brought together the many alienists toiling alone and isolated in the asylums scattered throughout the land: the journal provided a forum where they could discuss their ideas and concerns.

Daniel Hack Tuke was 10 years younger than Bucknill, having been born in 1827 in York, and was the grandson of William Tuke, the founder of the York Retreat. Tuke had an unhappy upbringing and was a sickly child. His mother died shortly after his birth and his father, who was greatly affected by her death, appears to have been a strict and deeply religious man. Unlike Bucknill, Tuke showed an early interest in lunacy, spending two years at the Retreat learning about insanity before he began his medical studies at St Bartholomew's. After qualifying in 1852, he started in practice in York and began publishing in the medical journals; his early papers in the *Journal of Mental Science* brought him into contact with John Bucknill, who was the editor at the time. In fact, Bucknill warmly welcomed Tuke into the fold of medical writers. In 1854, he reviewed a short book by Tuke about *Mechanical Restraint*, and paid him handsome praise. Opening with a declaration that, "It is with great pleasure that we see the honored name of Tuke associated with the highest principles in the treatment of the Insane", Bucknill (1854) concluded that the book showed "merits" that were "intrinsic and genuine". It was clear that Tuke represented to Bucknill, as he did to many others, the living link with what was perceived as the noble tradition of psychiatry's past. Despite these auspicious beginnings, misfortunes struck. Tuke had originally intended to open a private asylum in his native city, but he suffered a pulmonary haemorrhage. Tuberculosis was diagnosed and Tuke was advised, like Bucknill, to travel south. He eventually settled in Falmouth where he was to remain for 15 years.

Thus, at the time of the first edition of the *Manual* in 1858, the careers of the two men looked rather different. Bucknill was 41, and, having stumbled into alienism almost by accident, was by now a fairly eminent figure in British psychiatry. He was the well regarded editor of the *Journal of Mental Science*, the author of numerous papers, and for the past 14

years a successful asylum superintendent. By contrast, Tuke, who was 31, had reached a transitional stage in his career. Illness had compelled him to give up his medical practice and he was to be without formal employment for a further 15 years. He was, however, achieving some recognition as the author of a steady stream of papers about insanity, and, no doubt, his famous name had helped him.

### Writing the *Manual*

In the preface of the first edition of the *Manual of Psychological Medicine*, Bucknill & Tuke (1858) outlined their reason for writing:

The Authors of the following pages have long felt the want of a systematic treatise on Insanity, adapted to the use of students and practitioners in Medicine. . . . Their aim has been, to supply a text-book which may serve as a guide in the acquisition of such knowledge, sufficiently elementary to be adapted to the wants of the students, and sufficiently modern in its views and explicit in its teaching to suffice the demands of the practitioner.

The writing of the book was divided into two, with Tuke responsible for the chapters on lunacy laws, classification, aetiology, statistics and the description of the various forms of insanity, and Bucknill for those on diagnosis, pathology and treatment. The division reflected their respective experiences: Tuke tackling the more theoretical aspects of insanity, and Bucknill dealing with the clinical side. Both had a broadly similar conception of insanity and saw the brain as the seat of all madness. As they wrote, they were guided by, "The great principle that Mental Disease depends solely upon cerebral conditions'. Within this framework there was room for some differences in opinion; for example, they disagreed about moral insanity and mesmerism, two subjects which were to interest Tuke throughout his career, and which he was to defend against the sceptics.

Some differences in literary style were also evident. Bucknill's prose tended to be more florid, more prolix and with more frequent excursions into English literature. In contrast, Tuke's style was simple; "plain and clear" in the words of one reviewer (Ireland, 1895). Bucknill was sometimes contentious, for instance expressing his views on the shortcomings of staff in private asylums. Tuke was more cautious and preferred to give both sides of the argument. Despite their differences, Bucknill was later to claim that throughout the preparation of the various editions, "they never had the ghost of a misunderstanding" (Ireland, 1895).

The *Manual* was a success and ran to four editions, the last appearing in 1879 (Bucknill & Tuke, 1879). Throughout this period it domi-

nated psychiatry in Britain and other English-speaking countries. The American psychiatrist, Pliny Earle (1877) was to hail it as, "by far the best treatise on insanity in the English language and there is reason to believe it has no superior in any other". In subsequent editions it enlarged in size, swelling to over 800 pages by the time of its last appearance. The authors observed that there had been a great deal of activity in the field of 'Psychological Science' since the book's inception, but they sounded a note of caution about determining what was actually valuable among the great mass of rapidly accumulating observations: "As the field of inquiry extends", they wrote, "the crop of good results is more difficult to garner" (Bucknill & Tuke, 1879).

How does the *Manual* compare with the *Dictionary* of 1892? If, as Bynum (1991) suggests, the *Dictionary* provides a unique snapshot of the state of British psychiatry at the end of the 19th century, then the *Manual* offers a reflection of psychiatry at mid-century. What is perhaps surprising is the similarity rather than the difference between the two works. True, the *Dictionary* was a more ambitious project with its 128 authors; its attempts to grapple with philosophy, psycho-physiology and psycho-therapeutics; its accounts of development in Europe and America; its extended bibliography and its outline of the history of the insane. But, fundamentally the two books shared the same view of mental disease. Bynum (1991) has observed that the *Dictionary* can be seen as representing "the culmination of the tradition that was to be utterly transformed". By this he means that the Victorian endeavour to construct a classification, based on the traditional categories of mental disease, was to be swept away and rendered redundant by the work of Emil Kraepelin. A comparison of the respective discussions of this important subject in the two books reveals there was no essential difference between the *Manual* and the *Dictionary* in their approach to classification.

### After a literary partnership

By the time of the last edition of the *Manual* in 1879, the fortunes of both men had greatly improved. Bucknill had left his asylum post to take up the more prestigious position of Lord Chancellor's Visitor of Lunatics, resigning in 1876 to pursue private practice and to edit the newly established journal, *Brain*. Tuke's health had improved and he had returned to London in 1875 to become a consultant in lunacy and later a governor of Bethlem Hospital. He was shortly to become the joint editor of the *Journal of Mental Science*, and he was also rewarded with the Presidency of the MPA in 1881. Tuke was to

remain deeply immersed in the affairs of the MPA and the journal right up to his death in 1895. In contrast, Bucknill was to become less active in psychiatric circles and his name appears only infrequently in the journal from this point onwards.

The contrast in their respective standing in British psychiatry by the end of the century was reflected in the nature of the obituaries the two men received in the *Journal of Mental Science*. While Tuke was accorded 10 pages and his portrait at the beginning of the journal, Bucknill was allotted only four, and this buried in the 'Notes and news' section. Tuke was described in glowing, eulogistic and reverential terms, in contrast to the more mundane, although generally admiring account of Bucknill's career. This imbalance was not reflected in the general medical journals, such as the *Lancet*, which devoted about equal amounts of space to the deaths of the two men, and perhaps gave a less partisan view of their achievements. Neither was considered to be a particularly original thinker, and they were both lauded more for their ability to synthesise and expound current theories than to develop new ones. In general terms both men had enjoyed successful careers and had become members of the psychiatric elite: not for them the unrewarding grind and relative obscurity of asylum work, which Bucknill had so feelingly described before he managed to escape, and which Tuke had never experienced. Instead, both took up the more congenial work of private practice, found fame as medical authors, enjoyed a degree of affluence, and partook of the social life of the metropolis. Bucknill was rewarded with a knighthood late in life, though not for his work in lunacy, and Tuke became the acknowledged doyen of his profession.

What, then, can we say about the relationship between the two men? We do not have access to letters or memoirs which might have provided clues to the more personal aspects of their friendship. Instead we have the broad outline of their professional lives, and the observations of various obituarists which, of course, pose their own problems of interpretation. From these sources a picture of 40 years' friendship untroubled by rancour or rivalry emerges. Indeed, the last image we have of the two men is of them sitting in their London Club, engaged in light-hearted banter: Bucknill proposing a wager to Tuke that he would not live to complete his *Dictionary*.

And yet, as Bynum (1991) has observed, we live in more cynical times and modern biographers have encouraged us to question such apparent tranquillity and search for the discord beneath the surface. Did Bucknill's wager betray unconscious aggressive feelings towards Tuke? Did he harbour hopes that Tuke would, indeed

die before he completed his *Dictionary*? We do not know. And perhaps Tuke would have responded to our 20th-century speculations by advising us to consult the entry in the *Dictionary* under "Cynicism, morbid", which identifies such an attitude as evidence of mental disturbance.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to archivists at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, the Library of the Religious Society of Friends, and Devon Record Office.

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